

# HOSTILE WITNESSES

HOW THE HISTORIC ENEMIES OF  
THE CHURCH PROVE CHRISTIANITY



GARY MICHUTA

# Table of Contents

[The Witness Selection Program](#)

[New Testament Hostile Witnesses](#)

[King Herod the Great \(ca. 74–4 B.C.\)](#)

[Herod Antipater I \(Antipas\) \(20 B.C.–A.D. 39\)](#)

[Gamaliel the Elder \(Rabban Gamaliel I\) \(d. A.D. 63\)](#)

[Demons and Demoniacs](#)

[The Pharisees, Scribes, and High Priest](#)

[Pagans in the New Testament](#)

[Early Pagan Testimony](#)

[Publius Cornelius Tacitus \(A.D. 56–117\) Roman Senator and Historian](#)

[Plinius Caecilius Secundus \(Pliny the Younger\) Roman Governor of Bithynia-Pontus \(A.D. 61–112\)](#)

[Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus \(ca. A.D. 69–122\) Roman Historian](#)

[The Nazareth Inscription \(1st Century\)](#)

[Early Jewish and Rabbinical Writings](#)

[Titus Flavius Josephus \(ca. A.D. 37–100\) Soldier and Jewish Historian](#)

[Rabbinical Sources: the Mishnah and Talmud](#)

[Later Pagan and Heretical Writers](#)

[Celsus the Platonist \(fl. ca. 175–180\) Philosopher and Polemicist](#)

[Lucian of Samosata \(ca. A.D. 125–180\) Rhetorician and Satirist](#)

[Porphyry of Tyre \(A.D. 234–305\) Philosopher and Polemicist](#)

[Apollonius of Tyana \(A.D. 15–100\) First-Century Pagan Wonder-Worker](#)

[Alexamenos Graffito \(2nd Century\) Anti-Christian Graffiti](#)

[Greek Magical Papyri \(5th Century\) Pagan Egyptian Papyrus](#)

[Flavius Claudius Julianus \(Julian the Apostate\) \(330–363\) Roman Emperor](#)

[Julian and the Jerusalem Temple](#)

[Islam and the Crusades](#)

[The Qur'an](#)

[Abu 'L-Husayn Muhammad Ibn Ahmad Ibn Jubayr \(1145–1217\)](#)

[Rabbi Efraim Ben Jacob of Bonn \(1132–1200\) Rabbi and Historian](#)

[The Inquisition](#)

[Henry Charles Lea \(1823–1909\) Protestant Historian](#)

[Juan Antonio Llorente \(1756–1823\)](#)

[King Ferdinand II of Aragon \(1452–1516\) King of Sicily and Aragon](#)

[François-Marie Arouet \(Voltaire\) \(1694–1778\) Author, Historian, and Philosopher](#)

[The Protestant Reformation](#)

[Martin Luther \(1483–1546\) Augustinian Monk and Father of the Protestant Reformation](#)

[John Calvin \(1509–1564\) Founder of Reformed Protestantism \(Calvinism\)](#)

[Lourdes, Fatima, and World War II](#)

[Émile Zola \(1840–1902\), French Novelist—Miracles at Lourdes](#)

[Portugese Anti-Clerical Newspapers—Miracle of Fatima \(October 13, 1917\)](#)

[National Socialist Party \(Nazis\) \(1935–1945\)](#)

[An Unexpected Image Emerges](#)

# *Hostile Witnesses*

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## Introduction

# The Witness Selection Program

“What I have written, I have written.” Those were the words of Pontius Pilate after directing that a sign be affixed to Jesus of Nazareth’s cross. On it was inscribed, “Jesus the Nazorean, the King of the Jews,” written in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek. The Jews protested, saying that the sign ought to read, “He said, ‘I am the King of the Jews.’” But Pilate would not be moved.

The sign Pilate authorized didn’t reflect his own beliefs about Jesus. As prefect of the Roman province of Judea, he certainly didn’t have the authority or the desire to proclaim anyone king. He did, however, wish to send a message: this is what happens to pretended kings. For those who believed that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah King, the placard proclaimed the truth. For the Jews who didn’t believe, it was an insult and a warning. For Pilate, it was a useful tool to send a message.

If, centuries later, Pilate’s sign were the only record in existence about Jesus, we could still deduce a few things about the one who hung on a cross at Calvary: his name was Jesus; he was from the town of Nazareth; and his execution was the result of a controversy over his kingship. Despite its intended purpose to ridicule, to warn, and maybe even to incite anger, the sign still says something true about the events that led up to Calvary. Pontius Pilate’s sign, therefore, is a hostile witness.

### THE PRAISE OF ENEMIES

The Psalm says, “Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings you have perfected praise, because of your enemies” (Ps. 8:2 LXX). Not only do the righteous praise Christ because of his enemies, but his enemies offer their own kind of praise. Their praise doesn’t come in the form of a compliment or some other sort of honor; it comes from the simple admission of the truth. Pilate affirmed the truth when his involvement in Jesus’ condemnation unwittingly produced the inscription. And that’s the curious thing about some of the historic enemies of the Church. When they were confronted with something about Christ or his Church that was too obvious to deny, they were forced to do one of two things: either concede the point and repackage it to suit their own purposes, or attempt to explain it away.



Regardless of which action they took, the result remains the same: they still attest that they've encountered something about Christ or his Church that was real and needed to be dealt with. In other words, they attest to the truth.

We call these unwitting corroborators of the truth *hostile witnesses*. They are, as the phrase suggests, witnesses who were hostile to Christ, his Church, or some aspect of his Church. Their testimonies are the best kind of evidence because they can't be said to reflect bias in favor of the Faith or the Church—quite the opposite, in fact. Yet despite their probative value, these hostile testimonies haven't been plumbed for all they are worth.

#### DIRECT AND INDIRECT EVIDENCE

Christian apologists naturally focus most of their attention on direct evidence in favor of their beliefs drawn from primary source material such as the New Testament, the early Church Fathers, and a few extra-biblical sources. But indirect evidence can attest just as powerfully to a given fact or event. To see how direct and indirect evidence works together, let's look at a situation that we've all encountered at one time or another: sitting in a traffic jam.

If you are stuck in a traffic jam, there are two ways you can find out what is causing the delay. You can learn about it by direct testimony (for instance, you can turn on the car radio to listen to a traffic report or look for a warning on your GPS), or you can observe the cars ahead of you. If you see cars and trucks in the distance all moving from your lane to the right lane, you know that there is an obstruction in your lane and that you'll also need to move to the right. The traffic report is direct evidence. The evasive action of the cars ahead of you is indirect evidence.

Hostile witnesses sometimes provide direct evidence. They may speak directly about Jesus, where he lived, what he did, how and when he died, and so on. This information is very valuable. Indeed, "historical Jesus" research focuses almost exclusively on such statements. The real value of hostile witnesses, however, is when they provide indirect evidence. When confronted with some brute fact that was contrary to their belief system, they are forced to deal with it just as we were forced to take evasive action in our traffic scenario. And just as the change in traffic patterns signals the presence of an obstruction and its location, the evasive actions of our hostile

witnesses signal to us some truth about Christ and his Church that they are attempting to avoid.

It is true that direct evidence usually provides more detail about a certain fact or event than indirect evidence. The latter is like the shadows cast by an illumined figure—by themselves, they reveal little more than the figure’s broad outline. But something remarkable occurs when the figure and its shadow are viewed together: a fuller, more three-dimensional figure emerges. Such is the effect of studying direct and indirect evidence about Christ and his Church—including hostile testimony.

#### APOLOGETIC VALUE

Studying Christ and his Church through the eyes of their enemies also has a practical benefit. Many of these opponents speak to issues that weren’t raised until centuries after they lived. In such cases, their value is doubled because they can’t be accused of harboring a bias; even if they were hostile to the Faith they had no knowledge of these future issues. Here’s an example: in modern times it became popular to claim that Jesus of Nazareth never existed. The pagan Roman historian Tacitus had no notion of this claim. His concern was to write about the persecutions under Nero. If Jesus was just a mythical figure fabricated by Christians, Tacitus would have had every reason to point it out—but he didn’t. Instead, he speaks about Jesus as someone who actually lived and was executed under Pontius Pilate—confirming that Jesus was no myth. Another example: a pagan graffito found in a building on Rome’s Palatine Hill, estimated to have been made around A.D. 200, depicts a man named Alexamenos worshipping a donkey-headed man crucified on a cross. What the ancient graffitist couldn’t have known is that centuries later a group called the Jehovah’s Witnesses would claim that Jesus was executed on a stake, not a cross. But this pagan’s attempt to mock Christianity provides evidence that they are wrong. Both Tacitus and the pagan graffitist, then, though hostile toward Christ and his Church, inadvertently vindicated certain truths about Christianity.

#### MORE TO THE STORY

These historic foes of the Church also make wonderful allies when it comes to combating historic anti-Catholic and anti-Christian myths that have taken root in our time. Many of these myths are so thoroughly ingrained in the popular imagination that it is difficult to debunk them. The reason for this

difficulty is that these myths provide simplistic, two-dimensional and easy-to-grasp explanations of complex events.

Here is where hostile testimony can be particularly effective. Hostile witnesses can be called upon in argument to give bite-sized counter-evidence that raises the possibility that the myth isn't telling the whole story. For example, if someone asserts that the Crusades were genocidal attempts to forcibly convert all Jews and Muslims, they first have to explain the testimonies of the Muslim chronicler Ibn Jubayr and Rabbi Ephraim ben Jacob of Bonn, who speak otherwise. Again, if someone asserts that the Inquisition was a murderous tool of the Church that killed millions of innocent people, you can call to its defense the former inquisitor Llorente, who had an ax to grind against his former employer, or even a hostile letter to the pope written by King Ferdinand of Spain.

Thus, the main purpose of invoking testimony of hostile witnesses is to show that there is more to certain assertions about Church history than what most people have been led to believe. Since their hostility toward the Faith makes it impossible to dismiss their statements as Catholic propaganda, hostile testimony is able to cut through the facade of these anti-Catholic and anti-Christian myths, and opens the door for further investigation.

#### LAYING A FOUNDATION

The following pages contain a veritable rogues' gallery of the historic opponents of the Faith, beginning with those recorded in the New Testament. In many ways, this initial layer of hostile testimonies serves as a baseline for later ones. By reviewing them chronologically, it's possible to see how certain assertions and accusations evolved over time. Cross-references are included to help the reader see these connections as the book progresses.

After the fourth century, our attention turns from individual witnesses to topics and events such as the rise of Islam, the Crusades, the Inquisition, the Protestant Reformation, the miracles at Lourdes, and events connected with the two World Wars. These parts provide counter-evidence to various myths and slanders about the Church, and show how it survives with the same supernatural vigor that it had in its earliest centuries.

#### QUESTIONS UNASKED

One oddity that will appear over and over again is the hostile witness's inability to ask the obvious questions. They will supply all sorts of explanations and excuses to explain some aspect of Christianity that they've encountered, but they rarely ask why. Questions like: Why does the name Jesus heal? Why do Christians work miracles? Why are people following a dead leader? As these unasked questions begin to accumulate, an unexpected picture begins to emerge from the murk of their anti-Christian and anti-Catholic vitriol. At first it is difficult to make out, but it is there, lurking between the lines of their discourses, buried under their insults, and hiding behind their obfuscations. We have only to uncover it by asking the questions they chose not to.

## Part I

# New Testament Hostile Witnesses

Pious Jews looked forward eagerly to the Messiah's Coming, but this feeling was not shared by all, especially people in positions of power. Kings, chief priests, scribes, and elders—all felt threatened. Not surprisingly, these groups make up a significant portion of the New Testament's hostile witnesses.

Christ's arrival also had a spiritual dimension. The devil had won dominion over humanity after the fall, and he exercised his dominion in various ways, most dramatically by demonic possession. Jesus' exorcisms show a change in dominion.<sup>1</sup> The statements made by these possessed individuals are included in our survey.

Dating the Gospels and Acts is little more than educated guesswork. A good argument can be made that they pre-date the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in A.D. 70, since they don't mention this fulfillment of one of Christ's prophecies.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the Gospels and Acts use sources that predate their own compositions, which brings the date of the New Testament's testimony even closer to the events it records.

The New Testament's hostile witnesses are important because their thoughts and ideas would be echoed throughout the centuries. Therefore, the testimonies in this part are really "ground zero" for our study, in terms both of being closest to the time of Christ and also being the beginning of reactions and dissimulations that will grow and evolve over time.

<sup>1</sup> Matthew 12:29; Mark 3:27; Luke 11:21.

<sup>2</sup> The Gospels diligently note every time Christ's words and deeds fulfilled prophecy. However, all four Gospels are silent when it comes to the fulfillment of Christ's prophecy about the destruction of the Jerusalem temple within one generation (Matt. 24; Mark 13; Luke 19:41–44; 21:5–37). The simplest inference that can be drawn from this rather conspicuous omission is that the destruction of the temple had yet to occur when the Gospels were written. This would place their date of composition sometime before A.D. 70.

## King Herod the Great (ca. 74–4 B.C.)

Julius Caesar (100–44 B.C.) appointed Herod procurator of Judea in 47 B.C. The Roman senate eventually appointed Herod to be the “king of the Jews.” Herod’s control of Judea wasn’t immediate; it took years for him to secure control over it. Even after Herod’s kingship was secured, the Jewish people never fully embraced him because of his Idumean descent. In the Old Testament, God promised David that his descendants would occupy the throne (2 Sam. 7:16–17; Ps. 89:4–5; 110:1–2; 132:11; Jer. 33:17), and since Herod was not Davidic, his kingship wasn’t considered—for lack of a better word—kosher. Herod knew this, and his insecurity shows up in a number of ways, such as by his attempt to ingratiate himself with the Jews through various building projects, especially the improvement and expansion of the Jerusalem temple. He also was a ruthless murderer, executing anyone he believed was a threat to his throne, including his own family members—causing Caesar Augustus (63 B.C.–A.D. 14) to quip, “It’s better to be Herod’s pig than a son.”<sup>3</sup>

### THE COMING OF THE MESSIAH

#### TESTIMONY

He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search diligently for the child. When you have found him, bring me word, that I too may go and do him homage” (Matt. 2:8).

When eastern Magi arrived in Jerusalem claiming they’d seen a sign in the heavens that the king of the Jews had been born (Matt. 2:2), Herod immediately understood that they were referring to the Messiah King (Matt. 2:3–4). After consulting Micah 5:1, which identified the Messiah’s birthplace as Bethlehem, he instructed the Magi to find the child and to return with news of him so that he “may go and do him homage.”

Whether or not Herod believed in the Messiah, he knew that the people believed, and any such claimant in the people’s eyes would have a more legitimate right to the throne than Herod himself. Therefore, he feigned piety in order to identify the individual and kill him. When this failed,

Herod “ordered the massacre of all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity two years old and under” (Matt. 2:16).<sup>4</sup>

#### HOSTILE WITNESS

There are some today who claim that first-century Jews weren’t expecting the imminent arrival of the Messiah. Herod’s actions speak against this idea. When the Magi approached Herod claiming that a king had been born, Herod did not question whether the Messiah was to be born at that time. Instead, he inquired *where* he would be born. This suggests that there was already (ca. 4 B.C.) a common expectation of the Messiah’s imminent arrival. Herod’s actions point to this expectation, as will later hostile witnesses who will likewise note such an expectation (see chapter seven).

<sup>3</sup> Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, 2, 4, 11.

<sup>4</sup> Some doubt the historicity of the murder of the Holy Innocents. The denial is based entirely on silence, especially that of the first-century Jewish historian Josephus. However, there are several reasons why Josephus’s silence is not dispositive. First, it was once thought that the number of innocents killed by Herod ran into the thousands. The best estimates now place the number at less than twenty, a comparatively insignificant figure compared to the carnage wrought by Herod. Second, there’s no indication that Josephus intended to chronicle every atrocity committed by Herod; he recorded only what he wished. One may say that this is still a significant omission, but Josephus also makes significant omissions elsewhere on other topics. For example, his detailed treatment of the Essenes entirely omits any mention of their apocalyptic worldview, the hallmark of the group. Third, it is quite possible that Josephus may not have connected the murders in Bethlehem with Herod. Matthew 2:16 does not say Herod ordered the murders (making it an official act), but rather “[Herod] sent and killed” (*kai aposteilas aneilen*). It’s quite possible that these murders were conducted by banditti, not by Herod’s troops (see *Protoevangelium of James*, 22). If this is so, Josephus, not knowing the background that precipitated the slaughter, may not have connected the murders with Herod.



## Herod Antipater I (Antipas) (20 B.C.–A.D. 39)

After Herod the Great's death, his kingdom was divided among his sons by Caesar Augustus. Archelaus became Ethnarch over Judea, and Herod Antipas ruled as Tetrarch over Galilee and Perea. Philip I received the Golan Heights and Batanea in southern Syria. Herod Antipas married the daughter of King Aretas IV of Nabatea (d. A.D. 40), but soon fell in love with another woman named Herodias (d. A.D. 39), the wife of his half-brother Philip. When Antipas's wife heard that he was planning to divorce her, she fled to her father's kingdom, and King Aretas IV subsequently declared war against and defeated Herod Antipas. Antipas's ultimate undoing, however, came by way of Herodias's brother, Agrippa, who convinced the emperor Caligula (A.D. 12–41) that Antipas was conspiring against him. The emperor sent Antipas into exile, and he was never heard from again.

### RECOGNITION OF JESUS' MIRACLES

#### TESTIMONY

At that time Herod the tetrarch heard of the reputation of Jesus and said to his servants, "This man is John the Baptist. He has been raised from the dead; that is why mighty powers are at work in him." Now Herod had arrested John, bound [him], and put him in prison on account of Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip, for John had said to him, "It is not lawful for you to have her." Although he wanted to kill him, he feared the people, for they regarded him as a prophet (Matt. 14:1–5).<sup>5</sup>

John the Baptist had gained notoriety among the Jews for being a holy and righteous man. John preached that Antipas's marriage to Herodias was in violation of the Mosaic Law (Lev. 18:16; 20:21). John's popularity and reputation both protected him and made him a threat. Antipas could not kill John for fear that John's followers would turn against him, and yet John's popularity and preaching could also start a potential uprising against Antipas. Herodias would ultimately be the one who sealed John's fate. After Herod Antipas had promised under oath to give his daughter whatever she wished, Herodias instructed her daughter to demand the head of John the Baptist (Matt. 14:5–11; Mark 6:19–27). Herod executed John, but his

conscience was apparently still troubled. When news of Jesus' miracles reached Herod's ear, he suspected that Jesus was John the Baptist raised from the dead.

Last century, the Protestant liberal scholar Rudolf Bultmann argued that the miracles recorded in the New Testament are myths, so he and many other liberal scholars who followed him took to *demythologizing* the New Testament by discounting all of its miracles. There are also people today known as *mythicists* who make an even broader accusation: not only are Jesus' miracles myths, but the entire story of the gospel is nothing other than an amalgam of pagan myths so concocted as to make Christianity more palatable to the pagan world.

Herod Antipas certainly wouldn't have subscribed to either of these groups' ideas. He understood Jesus' miracles to be a real phenomenon. What's interesting is that John never worked a single miracle despite being considered a prophet. Herod must have believed that he had averted a crisis by executing John. Upon hearing of the miracles performed by Jesus, however, Herod immediately knew that he was dealing with an even bigger problem, because Jesus was clearly greater than John. Why was Jesus greater? According to Herod Antipas, "because mighty powers are at work in him" (Matt. 14:2). Herod's logic only makes sense if Jesus was truly performing miracles. Otherwise, Jesus would have appeared to him as just another ordinary person or moral prophet.

<sup>5</sup> See also Mark 6:14–17.

## Gamaliel the Elder (Rabban Gamaliel I) (d. A.D. 63)

Gamaliel the Elder is known in rabbinic tradition as one of its greatest sages. He was the *Nasi* (prince) of the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem during the first century A.D., thus given the title “rabban” (our master). He is also renowned for his wisdom and piety. He died roughly twenty years before the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in A.D. 70. According to the Jewish *Mishnah*, “Since Rabban Gamaliel the Elder died, there has been no more reverence for the law, and purity and piety died out at the same time.”<sup>6</sup>

### MESSIANIC EXPECTATIONS AND CONTINUED MIRACLES

#### TESTIMONY

But a Pharisee in the Sanhedrin named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, respected by all the people, stood up, ordered the men to be put outside for a short time, and said to them, “Fellow Israelites, be careful what you are about to do to these men. Some time ago, Theudas appeared, claiming to be someone important, and about four hundred men joined him, but he was killed, and all those who were loyal to him were disbanded and came to nothing. After him came Judas the Galilean at the time of the census. He also drew people after him, but he too perished, and all who were loyal to him were scattered. So now I tell you, have nothing to do with these men, and let them go. For if this endeavor or this activity is of human origin, it will destroy itself. But if it comes from God, you will not be able to destroy them; you may even find yourselves fighting against God.” They were persuaded by him (Acts 5:34-39).

Peter and the apostles were teaching about Jesus in the temple area, healing the sick, and performing signs. Fearing their influence over the people, the Jewish leadership had the apostles brought before the Sanhedrin for questioning (Acts 5:12–27). At the end of the questioning, Rabban Gamaliel stood up and addressed the Sanhedrin’s other members. He referenced two first-century rebels, Theudas and Judas the Galilean, who are also mentioned by the first-century Jewish historian Josephus (A.D. 37–

100). Theudas had four hundred followers, and Judas the Galilean gained a sizable following as well. Both led unsuccessful revolts against Roman rule, and after their deaths their movements came to nothing. Gamaliel's point was that, following this pattern, Christ's followers would soon disperse as well, unless their movement was from God. In neither case, he suggested, was it prudent to take action against them. The Sanhedrin agreed, and the apostles were flogged and ordered not to speak in Christ's name (Acts 5:40).

#### HOSTILE WITNESS

Living in the first Christian century, Gamaliel had every reason to expect that after Jesus' execution his followers would soon disperse. That's what happened in the cases of Theudas and Judas the Galilean, who were only two of several such leaders during this period. The pattern had become so common that Gamaliel hardly had to argue the point. What was it about this period in time that it produced so many fallen leaders and would-be movements in Judea? The need to escape Roman occupation was certainly a big reason. But why were the Jewish people so willing, time and again, to follow these upstart leaders? Could it be that they had expected the imminent arrival of the Messiah? (See chapters one and seven.) And once one of these leaders died, his followers realized he could not have been the promised Messiah and disbanded. It's understandable, then, that Gamaliel would expect Christians to disband as well.

What is most curious is Gamaliel's warning at the end of his comments: "If it comes from God, you will not be able to destroy them; you may even find yourselves fighting against God." Why add this caveat? Three options are open to us.

The first option is that these are not Gamaliel's words. But aside from their potentially favorable application to Christianity, there is no reason to doubt their authenticity. Gamaliel was a highly respected figure at this time, and his counsel would certainly have been noted by the members of the Sanhedrin. Had Luke fabricated the remark, its authenticity could have been easily verified, and its debunking would have been embarrassing.

The second option is that Gamaliel was actually a secret Christian. There is an eastern tradition that Gamaliel and his son both secretly converted to

Christianity. This tradition is not credible, since it is highly unlikely that later rabbinical literature would have held Gamaliel in such high esteem.

The third option is the simplest, and perhaps makes the most sense within the context. Gamaliel gave the caveat, not because he had been convinced by Peter's speech and become a secret Christian, but because it was undeniable that the apostles were working signs and miracles. Thus, he admits that God may be behind this movement, and so to prevent the possibility of transgressing God's will, he advises the Sanhedrin to allow things to continue as they were.

Gamaliel's advice also highlights the astounding longevity of the Church. The devout followers of Theudas and Judas didn't last a decade without their leaders. Christ's Church, however, has outlived every first-century false messiah by over two millennia. For some additional perspective on the supernatural longevity of the Church, compare Gamaliel's observation above with that of the Protestant Evangelical Lord Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800–1859) some eighteen hundred years later:

There is not, and there never was on this earth, a work of human policy so well deserving of examination as the Roman Catholic Church. The history of that Church joins together the two great ages of human civilization. No other institution is left standing which carries the mind back to the times when the smoke of sacrifice rose from the Pantheon and when camelopards and tigers bounded in the Flavian Amphitheatre. The proudest royal houses are but of yesterday, when compared with the line of the supreme pontiffs. That line we trace back in an unbroken series, from the pope who crowned Napoleon in the nineteenth century to the pope who crowned Pepin in the eighth; and far beyond the time of Pepin the august dynasty extends, till it is lost in the twilight of fable. The Republic of Venice came next in antiquity. But the Republic of Venice was modern when compared with the papacy; and the Republic of Venice is gone, and the papacy remains.

The papacy remains, not in decay, not a mere antique, but full of life and youthful vigor. The Catholic Church is still sending forth to the farthest ends of the world missionaries as zealous as those who landed in Kent with Augustin, and still confronting hostile kings with the

same spirit with which she confronted Attila. The number of her children is greater than in any former age. Her acquisitions in the New World have more than compensated for what she has lost in the Old. Her spiritual ascendancy extends over the vast countries which lie between the plains of the Missouri and Cape Horn, countries which a century hence, may not improbably contain a population as large as that which now inhabits Europe. The members of her communion are certainly not fewer than a hundred and fifty million; and it will be difficult to show that all other Christian sects united amount to a hundred and twenty million.

Nor do we see any sign which indicates that the term of her long dominion is approaching. She saw the commencement of all the governments and of all the ecclesiastical establishments that now exist in the world; and we feel no assurance that she is not destined to see the end of them all. She was great and respected before the Saxon had set foot on Britain, before the Frank had passed the Rhine, when Grecian eloquence still flourished at Antioch, when idols were still worshipped in the temple of Mecca. And she may still exist in undiminished vigor when some traveller from New Zealand shall, in the midst of a vast solitude, take his stand on a broken arch of London Bridge to sketch the ruins of St. Paul's.<sup>7</sup>

Even Macaulay's rhetorical vision of the future has become obsolete. The arch mentioned at the end of Macaulay's essay is no longer in England. It was dismantled in 1968. Every brick of the London Bridge was numbered, shipped to Lake Havasu City, Arizona, and reassembled where it remains today, too far from London for some future traveler to sketch St. Paul's cathedral. The cathedral, however, continues to stand as it has in good condition, as does the papacy.

<sup>6</sup> Mishnah, *Sotah* 15:18.

<sup>7</sup> Lord Macaulay, "Essay on Von Ranke's Ecclesiastical and Political History of the Pope" (1840), in *Essays and Lays of Ancient Rome* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1886), 542.

## Demons and Demoniacs

The ultimate enemy of Christ and Christianity is the devil and his minions. The Gospels record many instances when Jesus encountered demoniacs and cast out demons. Only two such instances will be mentioned here.

Several decades ago, when materialism held a firmer grip on scholarship, the existence of malevolent spirits was routinely dismissed as mere superstition. But many scholars today have come to recognize that belief in demonic possession and activity transcends all cultures and religions, both ancient and modern, and that these phenomena might therefore be quite real. Even within our secular culture, there is a growing interest and belief in the paranormal. Given this awareness, these two passages are included among our hostile witnesses.

### JESUS IS THE SON OF GOD

#### TESTIMONY

When he came to the other side, to the territory of the Gadarenes, two demoniacs who were coming from the tombs met him. They were so savage that no one could travel by that road. They cried out, "What have you to do with us, Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the appointed time?" (Matt. 8:28–29).<sup>8</sup>

In the chronology of Matthew's Gospel, no human being recognized Jesus to be the Son of God until both he and Peter walked on water (Matt. 14:25–33). Before that, only the demons suspected Jesus' divine sonship, first during the temptation in the desert (Matt. 4:3, 6) and here in Matthew 8:28–29.

#### HOSTILE WITNESS

The demoniac's words disclose two things. First, they attest to Christ's divine sonship. Second, they indicate, in an almost off-handed manner, that a certain time has been designated when Jesus will deal decisively with these malevolent spirits. In other words, the demoniacs recognized that Jesus, being the Son of God, had an eschatological role to play at the end of time. How could crazed, violent lunatics have had such a lucid and insightful understanding of the Messiah when those closest to him were only just beginning to understand?

### RECOGNITION OF AUTHORITY



## TESTIMONY

So extraordinary were the mighty deeds God accomplished at the hands of Paul that when face cloths or aprons that touched his skin were applied to the sick, their diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them. Then some itinerant Jewish exorcists tried to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those with evil spirits, saying, "I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul preaches." When the seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish high priest, tried to do this, the evil spirit said to them in reply, "Jesus I recognize, Paul I know, but who are you?" The person with the evil spirit then sprang at them and subdued them all. He so overpowered them that they fled naked and wounded from that house. When this became known to all the Jews and Greeks who lived in Ephesus, fear fell upon them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in great esteem (Acts 19:11-17).

This episode took place during Paul's missionary work in Ephesus, sometime between A.D. 54 and 57. Jesus' name was invoked not only for healings, but also for exorcisms. Exorcisms were not an exclusively Christian phenomenon; Jewish exorcists preceded Christianity, although the methods they employed are unclear. According to the Jewish historian Josephus, Jewish exorcists sometimes used words and items associated with King Solomon.<sup>9</sup> They believed that Solomon's gift of wisdom had allowed him to cast out demons (1 Kings 5:9–14).<sup>10</sup>

Acts 19:13–17 tells of the sons of the high priest Sceva, who were itinerant Jewish exorcists. They attempted to exorcise an evil spirit using the name of Jesus, with disastrous consequences. The evil spirit told them that he recognized Jesus and Paul, but not them. The possessed person then violently turned on the exorcists. Luke adds that because of this episode both Jews and Greeks held the name of the Jesus in great esteem.

## HOSTILE WITNESS

There are actually three groups of hostile witnesses in this passage. The first group is the Jewish exorcists. If they weren't Christians, why did they use Jesus' name instead of Solomon's, or some other one? Since Luke notes in Acts 19:12 that Paul's mighty deeds were well known, the context suggests that they might have seen Paul's successful use of Christ's name and were impressed enough with his results that they tried it out themselves. If so, the adoption of Jesus' name by these unbelieving Jewish exorcists attests to the authenticity of the Christian exorcisms they witnessed, since they obviously wouldn't have used Christ's name had they suspected Paul of trickery.

The second hostile witness is the evil spirit that possessed the person. He states that he recognized (the authority of) Jesus and Paul, but not the high

priest's sons. One can reasonably infer from this statement that the demon would have submitted to Christ's authority had the exorcism been done by Paul.

The third group of hostile witnesses is the Jews and pagans of Ephesus. The successes of Paul's exorcisms and other mighty deeds and the failure of the sons of Sceva were well known to the local population. As a result, Jesus' name was held in high esteem even by nonbelievers. This points to the authenticity of Paul's exorcisms and miraculous deeds (see also chapter eighteen).

<sup>8</sup> See also Mark 5:1–16; Luke 8:26–39.

<sup>9</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 8, 2, 5, in *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, ed. William Whiston (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987), 216.

<sup>10</sup> See also 1 Kings 5:9–14; Wisdom 7:20. See Louis Ginzberg's *Legends of the Jews*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003), 962–964.

## The Pharisees, Scribes, and High Priest

Jesus' constant antagonists throughout the Gospels come from three parties or sects within first-century Judaism: the Pharisees, the scribes, and the priests. All three of these parties are gathered together in this chapter. What were these groups and why were they especially antagonistic toward Jesus?

The Pharisees were a very influential sect in first-century Judea. They were sticklers for the minutiae of the Law and saw themselves as instructors of the people. Jesus' teaching, therefore, was seen as a threat to their authority. The scribes also made up a distinct class within first-century Judaism. They were trained in reading and writing and were known for their scriptural expertise. The scribes and Pharisees, because of their attention to the Torah, were natural allies.

The priesthood was different. It was composed mainly of Sadducees, who were often antagonistic to the Pharisees, differing from them on several points of doctrine and practice. The priests were largely from the upper class. Their role was mostly cultic—offering sacrifices, and administering the affairs of the temple—but they also wielded a degree of political and social power.

All three groups would be highly critical of anyone claiming to have greater authority than their own. Jesus, therefore, would have been seen as a threat.

### AUTHENTICITY OF CHRIST'S MIRACLES

#### TESTIMONY

As they were going out, a demoniac who could not speak was brought to him, and when the demon was driven out, the mute person spoke. The crowds were amazed and said, "Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel." But the Pharisees said, "He drives out demons by the prince of demons" (Matt. 9:32–34).<sup>11</sup>

Jesus' exorcisms and healings astonished the crowds who witnessed them. The Pharisees, however, asserted that Jesus accomplished these amazing feats by tapping into demonic powers (that is, "by the prince of demons"). Jesus' response is devastating: if the prince of demons is doing good works by driving out lesser demons, then the demonic world is divided against itself and cannot stand.

## HOSTILE WITNESS

The Pharisees' reaction to Jesus' miracles concedes a great deal. They never deny that Jesus performed miracles—their reaction assumes that he did. Nor do the Pharisees ever accuse Jesus of using some sort of trickery to work these miracles, though if he had it would have been in their best interests to expose him. The best they could do was to say that his powers were demonic, coming not from just any demon but from the “prince of demons,” the devil himself. Jesus' miracles must have been quite astounding for the Pharisees to attribute them to such a satanic eminence.

That the Pharisees didn't deny Jesus' miracles, but sought instead to explain them away, shows that they must have been well known and beyond dispute.

## JESUS CLAIMED TO BE GOD

### TESTIMONY

The high priest rose before the assembly and questioned Jesus, saying, “Have you no answer? What are these men testifying against you?” But he [Jesus] was silent and answered nothing. Again the high priest asked him and said to him, “Are you the Messiah, the son of the Blessed One?” Then Jesus answered, “I am; and ‘you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power and coming with the clouds of heaven.’” At that the high priest tore his garments and said, “What further need have we of witnesses? You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?” They all condemned him as deserving to die (Mark 14:60–64).<sup>12</sup>

During the Sanhedrin's interrogation of Jesus, the high priest charges Jesus to state whether he is the Messiah. Jesus answers in the affirmative and quotes from the prophet Daniel. The high priest tears his robes and exclaims “What further need have we of witnesses? You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?”

How did Jesus blaspheme? What caused the high priest's ferocious reaction? One possibility is that when Jesus answered “I am” he wasn't just saying “yes,” but “I AM,” the same words used in the Greek Old Testament for the divine name of God (Exod. 3:14 LXX).<sup>13</sup> In the first century, pronouncing the divine name aloud was considered sacrilegious, and worthy of capital punishment. But Matthew 26:64, the parallel passage to the one quoted above, records Jesus' reply as “You have said so”—in other words, Matthew understood Jesus' “I am” to be a simple affirmation.<sup>14</sup> So this first possible explanation for the high priest's reaction is doubtful.

The second possible explanation is that Jesus' affirmation that he was the Messiah was itself a blasphemy. But the Jews of Jesus' day generally believed that the Messiah would be human, so claiming to be him wouldn't have been seen as equivalent to claiming to be God, and would therefore not constitute blasphemy or deserve capital punishment.

The third and most plausible explanation for the high priest's reaction may be found in Jesus' application of Daniel's prophecy to himself. In Daniel 7:13–14, the prophet tells of how “I saw in a dream coming with the clouds of heaven One like a son of man. When he reached the Ancient of Days [God] and was presented before him, he received dominion, splendor, and kingship; all nations, peoples and tongues will serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, his kingship, one that shall not be destroyed.” Jesus identified himself as that “son of man” who was to come “with the clouds of heaven.” Although this is an extraordinary claim, it's not blasphemous—until Jesus adds one more element: that he, the Son of Man, will be “seated at the right hand of the Power” (Mark 14:62). This refers to an earlier vision of Daniel:

As I watched, thrones were set up and the Ancient of Days took his throne . . . his throne was flames of fire, with wheels of burning fire. A river of fire surged forth, flowing from where he sat; thousands upon thousands were ministering to him, and myriads upon myriads stood before him (Dan. 7:9–10).

The rabbis noticed that Daniel speaks of more than one throne being set up. The Ancient of Days, who is God, took one throne, but there is no mention of who took the other throne. They speculated that the son of man, when he received universal dominion over the earth, would take the other throne.<sup>15</sup> Sounds reasonable. But there is a problem. Jews are monotheists. God alone is enthroned and has universal dominion over the earth (Ps. 45:7). If the Messiah is also enthroned and has the same dominion as God, then the Messiah must somehow possess prerogatives that are proper only to God (Heb. 1:8). The “Son of Man,” therefore, must be divine (that is, the one God). When Jesus links “coming with the clouds” with being “seated at the right hand of the Power,” he essentially claims for himself divinity. Hearing these words, the high priest tears his robes (an act forbidden by the Law) and charges Jesus with blasphemy and condemns him to death.<sup>16</sup>

## HOSTILE WITNESS

It has become fashionable to assert that Jesus never claimed to be God. Popular novels such as Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* even go so far as to suggest that Jesus wasn't really seriously considered to be divine until the Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325!<sup>17</sup> The high priest's reaction, however, shows that both claims are false. By applying these two prophecies of Daniel to himself, Jesus claimed for himself things that are only proper to God. The high priest, and all who heard Christ, knew what he was saying—and sentenced him to death for it.

## THE BOOK OF WISDOM IS SCRIPTURE

### TESTIMONY

Those passing by reviled him, shaking their heads and saying, "You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself, if you are the Son of God, [and] come down from the cross!" Likewise the chief priests with the scribes and elders mocked him and said, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. So he is the king of Israel! Let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. He trusted in God; let him deliver him now if he wants him. For he said, "I am the Son of God" (Matt. 27:39–43).

While Jesus hung on the cross, the people taunted him to come down. The chief priests, scribes, and elders echoed these taunts. But they added something new: They changed the challenge from *Jesus coming down* from the cross to *God rescuing Jesus* from the cross. Where in the Old Testament did God ever promise to rescue the true Son of God? Most Protestant bibles have a cross-reference to Psalm 22:8 ("All who see me mock me; they curl their lips and jeer; they shake their heads at me"), which is clearly at work in this passage. But Psalm 22 says nothing about the true Son of God. Catholic, Orthodox, and older Protestant bibles supply an additional cross-reference to Wisdom 2:17–18, which reads:

Let us see whether his words be true; let us find out what will happen to him in the end. For if the Righteous One is the Son of God, God will help him and deliver him from the hand of his foes.

Wisdom 2:17–18 provides the needed promise that God would rescue his Son. There simply is no other text in the Bible on which the Pharisees could

have based their claim.

Moreover, the chief priests, scribes, and elders must have believed the book of Wisdom was Sacred Scripture, or at least that Christ and his followers believed it to be. Why? Put yourself in the sandals of the chief priests, scribes, and elders. You have before you a person whom you believe to be a false messiah, and you have one final chance to discredit him in front of the crowds. What do you do? Do you reference a text that nobody accepts as Scripture, or one that everybody does? Obviously, you'd use the latter. The chief priests, scribes, and elders, therefore, witness to the fact that the book of Wisdom was widely accepted within pre-Christian Judaism.

#### HOSTILE WITNESS

Our hostile witnesses touch on a point of dispute between Catholics and Protestants. The book of Wisdom is one of seven books included in what is called the Deuterocanon.<sup>18</sup> According to Catholics and the Orthodox these books are canonical Scripture, inspired by God and capable of determining or confirming doctrine. Protestants, however, reject these books as “Apocrypha”—that is, as human writings that may be edifying to read, but are neither inspired nor able to confirm doctrine.

The point at issue centers largely on the Deuterocanon's omission from the Rabbinic Bible. The rabbis define the contents of their Bible in accord with a Hebrew text tradition known as the Masoretic Text (MT). All books, or portions of books, found within that text were affirmed as sacred, and all that were absent were rejected. Since the Deuterocanon and the New Testament were not part of the Masoretic Text tradition, they were excluded from the Rabbinic Bible<sup>19</sup> (see chapter twelve). Christians, however, continued to use an older collection of sacred texts that included the Deuterocanon.

The first Christian to reject the Deuterocanon as “Apocrypha” was St. Jerome in the fourth century. As a result, the Church met in council to reaffirm the historic Christian canon, which included the Deuterocanon, at the councils of Hippo in 393 and Carthage in 397. It was also reaffirmed by Pope Innocent I in A.D. 401.

The Protestant rejection of the Deuterocanon began with Martin Luther. In 1519, in a debate over purgatory, Luther rejected 2 Maccabees and appealed to St. Jerome for authority (see chapter twenty-eight). From that point on, Protestantism could never allow the Deuterocanon the full



canonical status it once enjoyed, because to do so would make some of their doctrines unbiblical.<sup>20</sup>

By using the deuterocanonical book of Wisdom, our hostile witnesses show that there were Jews during the time of Jesus who held the book of Wisdom to be Sacred Scripture in its fullest sense.

### DID THE DISCIPLES STEAL THE BODY?

#### TESTIMONY

The next day, the one following the day of preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate and said, “Sir, we remember that this impostor while still alive said, ‘After three days I will be raised up.’ Give orders, then, that the grave be secured until the third day, lest his disciples come and steal him and say to the people, ‘He has been raised from the dead.’ This last imposture would be worse than the first.” Pilate said to them, “The guard is yours; go secure it as best you can.” So they went and secured the tomb by fixing a seal to the stone and setting the guard (Matt. 27:62–66).

Matthew records how the chief priests and Pharisees asked Pilate to take measures to prevent Jesus’ followers from perpetrating a fraud. They feared that Jesus’ body would be stolen and then his disciples would pretend he had risen from the dead. Pilate allowed them to seal and secure the tomb themselves, and so they did.

#### HOSTILE WITNESS

In his 1965 best-seller *The Passover Plot*, Hugh Schonfeld popularized what is called the “Swoon Theory,” which teaches that Christ’s resurrection was not a resurrection at all, but a resuscitation. According to this theory, Jesus never died—he was only wounded and unconscious. After spending time in the tomb, he revived, unwrapped his burial cloths, rolled back the stone, and appeared to the apostles (who misinterpreted his reappearance as a resurrection).

Our hostile witnesses’ actions as described in Matthew 27:62–66 above, speak against this theory. They knew that Jesus was dead. Their concern was keeping Jesus’ followers out of the tomb, not keeping him in.

In addition to giving counter-testimony to the Swoon Theory, our hostile witnesses provide indirect evidence in another dispute: whether the prodigies described in Matthew 27:51–54 as having occurred during Christ’s crucifixion actually happened.

To settle that dispute, let's start with this: as far as we can tell, there was no widespread expectation that Jesus would rise on the third day. The Jews generally understood that the Messiah would "[remain] forever" (John 12:34), and that the only resurrection that would take place would be at the end of time. This belief was so widespread and ingrained that even after Jesus repeatedly told his own disciples that he would rise, they failed to comprehend it (Mark 9:10; Luke 18:31–34; John 2:22; 13:7). Christ's death on the cross, then, should have ended any hope that he was the Messiah, just as happened with the dozen or so pseudo-messiahs after their deaths (see chapter four).

Given all this, did the Jewish leaders really have any reason to fear that Jesus' disciples, who were in hiding, could convince the populace that he rose from the dead? Yet the Jewish leaders feared exactly that, and took measures to prevent it. Why? What could have possibly have happened after the Crucifixion to convince the very people who jeered at Jesus on the cross that he might rise from the dead after all?

Matthew's account of prodigies when Christ died (darkness at noon, earthquake, open tombs, temple veil torn, etc.)<sup>21</sup> just might provide the answer. Could it be that whatever expectations that were dashed when Jesus died were brought to life again by these strange occurrences (Matt. 27:54; Mark 15:39)? If these things did occur, the crowd that witnessed them would have been moved to see that Jesus was something more than just a charismatic teacher or even a prophet, and their expectations would have been raised that perhaps he would rise again as he claimed. This would also explain our hostile witnesses' otherwise ungrounded fear that Christ's disciples could convince the populace that he did rise. Hence the measures taken by the Jewish leaders to ensure that Christ's disciples couldn't tamper with his body.

## THE EMPTY TOMB

### TESTIMONY

They assembled with the elders and took counsel; then they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers, telling them, "You are to say, 'His disciples came by night and stole him while we were asleep.' And if this gets to the ears of the governor, we will satisfy [him] and keep you out of trouble." The soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has circulated among the Jews to the present [day] (Matt. 28:12–15).

The directions given to the guards were both necessary and self-contradictory. The well-trained, fully-armed detachment could easily have fended off the disciples had they attempted to steal Christ's body. The only way the disciples could have succeeded would have

been to steal the body while the guards were asleep. But this is highly unlikely. After all, this wasn't the first time Roman soldiers had set up a watch. Surely they took precautions to ensure that someone was always awake and on duty. Even if they all did fall asleep, it beggars belief that the disciples could have broken the seal and rolled a large stone away from its entrance without waking anyone.

#### HOSTILE WITNESS

Our hostile witnesses affirm two very important facts. First, the tomb really was empty. Obviously, they wouldn't have needed to bribe the guards if Jesus' body remained in the tomb. Second, they provide what appears to be the earliest official explanation by nonbelievers of the empty tomb: the disciples stole the body.

The report that the disciples had stolen the body in order to perpetrate a fraud could have made it up the Roman chain of command; our hostile witnesses seem to have anticipated this when they offered to bribe not only the guards, but if necessary the guards' superiors. As we will see later, there is evidence that such a report did make its way to the ear of the emperor, provoking an official rescript to prohibit the removal of dead bodies from tomb with ill intent (see chapter nine).

### CHRIST'S REAL PRESENCE IN THE EUCHARIST

#### TESTIMONY

The Jews murmured about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven," and they said, "Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph? Do we not know his father and mother? Then how can he say, 'I have come down from heaven'?" (John 6:41–42).

The Jews quarreled among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us [his] flesh to eat?" (John 6:52).

Then many of his disciples who were listening said, "This saying is hard; who can accept it?" (John 6:60).

These three quotations come from the Bread of Life discourse in John 6:22–72. Before the discourse, Jesus had performed the miracle of the multiplication of loaves (John 6:5–13). This miracle has several points of contact with the eucharistic celebration at the Last Supper.[22](#)

After the miracle, Jesus avoids the crowd's jubilation by crossing the sea to Capernaum. Some of the crowd, perhaps looking for another miracle, find him in Capernaum (John 6:22–26). Jesus says to them, “Do not work for food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you” (John 6:27). Jesus then refers to himself metaphorically, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst” (John 6:35). After explaining how he will not reject anyone the Father has given him, Jesus adds that he “came down from heaven.” This provokes our hostile witnesses' first response: How could Jesus have “come down from heaven” when we know his parents? Jesus reiterates that he is the bread that came down from heaven so that whoever eats this bread will live forever, adding “and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world” (John 6:51). At this, our hostile witnesses give their second response: “How can this man give us (his) flesh to eat?”

The discussion makes a transition from a metaphorical self-reference “I am the bread of life . . . that comes down from heaven” to the bread that Christ *will give* the people to eat, namely his flesh (John 6:27, 51). He also adds an additional element: the drinking of his blood. “Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you” (John 6:53). The only other passages in the New Testament where Jesus references bread, body, and blood together is at the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper (Matt. 26:26–28; Mark 14:22–25; Luke 22:19–20; 1 Cor. 11:24–25).

Jesus answers our hostile witnesses' question “How can this man give us flesh to eat?” quite forthrightly: “For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink” (John 6:55). Jesus' flesh and blood are not going to be given symbolically, but as “true food and . . . true drink.” In other words, his disciples must eat his flesh and drink his blood literally, albeit under the appearance of bread and wine.

The third response comes not from the crowd, but from Christ's own disciples: “This is a hard saying, who can accept it?” and many of them leave his company.

HOSTILE WITNESS

The three responses by our hostile witnesses indicate the true meaning of Jesus' words. First, when he said, "I am the bread of life . . . that comes down from heaven," our hostile witnesses had no objection: they understood him to be speaking metaphorically. But then Jesus adds, "and the bread that I will give [to eat] is my flesh for the life of the world." The hostile witnesses, understanding his words literally this time, objected, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" (John 6:52). If Jesus' words were *not* to be taken literally, he could have explained that he was speaking metaphorically as he had done earlier. But he didn't. The third response comes from Christ's own disciples: "This is a hard saying, who can accept it?" If Jesus was using a figurative expression to emphasize the need to believe in him, his words shouldn't have raised an eyebrow, much less the objection "This is a hard saying."<sup>23</sup> Jesus frequently taught about the need to have faith in him. There would be nothing new here. But his disciples' reaction shows that they understood Jesus to be speaking literally about eating his flesh and drinking his blood, which certainly would make it a hard saying. Significantly, Jesus never corrects their interpretation; instead, he responds, "Does this shock you? What if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?" (John 6:61–62) What he is essentially saying is this: "If you were to see where the Son of Man came from and where he is going to ascend (that is, to the right hand of God), you'd know that he could give his flesh and blood as true food and true drink."

John comments, "As a result of this, many (of) his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him" (John 6:66). Again, Jesus did not stop to correct them, because they understood him correctly. Instead, he turned to the twelve apostles and asked, "Do you also want to leave?" (John 6:67).

Jesus' literalism concerning his Real Presence in the Eucharist later became a huge stumbling block for believers and nonbelievers alike (as we will see in chapter eight).

## PUBLIC MIRACLES

### TESTIMONY

So they ordered them to leave the Sanhedrin and conferred with one another, saying, "What are we to do with these men? Everyone living in Jerusalem knows that a remarkable sign was done through them,

and we cannot deny it. But so that it may not be spread any further among the people, let us give them a stern warning never again to speak to anyone in this name” (Acts 4:15–17).

Peter and John had healed a man crippled from birth at the gate of the temple. The healing caused quite a sensation. All who frequented the temple knew the man, since he begged for alms daily. Moreover, the healing had taken place before a large crowd (Acts 3:1–11). The priests, the captain of the temple guard, and the Sadducees laid hands on Peter and John and held them in custody. The next day a large group assembled, including “their leaders, elders, and scribes . . . with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly class” (Acts 4:5–6). After Peter explained what had happened, the apostles were taken into a different room as the Sanhedrin discussed the matter. Since the healing was too well-known to deny or dismiss, they decided to forbid the apostles from teaching in the name of Jesus.

#### HOSTILE WITNESS

The healing of the lifelong cripple has two important aspects to it. First, it was very public. The nature and extent of the man’s affliction was known to all, and his relatives could attest that he had suffered from it his entire life. As with the other miracles we have discussed, our hostile witnesses do not dispute this one’s authenticity, which in itself says a lot. Second, our hostile witnesses identify a key aspect of Christian miracles that is absent from those performed by pagan wonder-workers, namely the miracles’ sign function. The apostles weren’t doing magic tricks to impress the crowd; our hostile witnesses recognized this by identifying these miracles as “signs” (Greek: *semeion*). A sign is that which points to something. Pagan wonders were not signs—they were feats performed to impress onlookers. Jewish and Christian miracles function primarily as signs. In this case, the healing points to a divine confirmation of the apostles’ message. Our hostile witnesses’ problem was that “a remarkable sign was done through them,” and everybody knew it.

There’s little doubt that Luke is recording an actual event. The claim that “everyone in Jerusalem” knew about this healing would have been easily verifiable. He gives the approximate time, its location, the groups that assembled, even the names of individuals who were involved. The book of

Acts is fairly easy to date. It ends abruptly after Paul arrived in Rome in the early 60s. There is no mention of the first Jewish revolt (A.D. 66–72), Paul’s execution (ca. A.D. 67–68), or the destruction of the temple (A.D. 70). Therefore, it’s reasonable to set the date of the book’s composition sometime between A.D. 62 and A.D. 66, well within the living memory of those who witnessed the healing.

<sup>11</sup> See also Matthew 12:24; Mark 3:22; Luke 11:14–15.

<sup>12</sup> See also Matthew 26:61–66.

<sup>13</sup> Exodus 3:14 LXX, *Ego eimi ho on* Jesus says in Mark 14:62, *ego eimi*.

<sup>14</sup> Matthew 26:64 LXX, Jesus replies, “*su eipas* (you have said [so]), not *ego eimi* (I AM).”

<sup>15</sup> B. *Sanhedrin* 4:5, V.9. N-P. Also, 1 Enoch 45:3.

<sup>16</sup> See Leviticus 10:6; 21:10.

<sup>17</sup> Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 233.

<sup>18</sup> The Deuterocanon consists of the books of Wisdom (Wisdom of Solomon), Sirach (ben Sira or Ecclesiasticus), Tobit, Judith, Baruch, 1 and 2 Maccabees, as well as two chapters in Daniel and Esther.

<sup>19</sup> See Gary Michuta, *The Case for the Deuterocanon: Evidence and Arguments* (Livonia, MI: Nikaria Press, 2015).

<sup>20</sup> See *Why Catholic Bibles Are Bigger: The Untold Story of the Lost Books of the Protestant Bible* (Pinckney Michigan: Grotto Press, 2007) for a more detailed discussion of what happened to the Deuterocanon within Protestantism.

<sup>21</sup> One of the prodigies, darkness at noon, may have been recorded by the ancient historian Thallus (ca. A.D. 52). Thallus’s work is no longer extant, but the early Church Father Julius Africanus, who commented on his work, states, “Thallus, in the third book of his histories, explains away the darkness as an eclipse of the sun—unreasonably, as it seems to me.” F.F. Bruce, *New Testament Documents* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 113.

<sup>22</sup> Both the Lord’s Supper and the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves are associated with the time of Passover (cf. Matt. 26:19; Mark 14:16; Luke 22:13, 15; John 6:4). In both instances, Jesus performs similar actions. For example, Jesus took the bread (cf. Matt. 26:26; Mark 14:22; Luke 22:19; John 6:11; 1 Cor. 11:24), gave thanks (cf. Matt. 26:27; Mark 14:23; John 6:11; 1 Cor. 11:24), and gave it (cf. Matt. 26:26; Mark 14:22; Luke 22:19; John 6:11).

<sup>23</sup> Even here there is a problem. In the Old Testament the figurative meaning of eating someone’s flesh means to inflict harm or calumny (Num. 23:24; Isa. 49:26; Mic. 3:3; Zech. 9:15). But this figurative meaning does not fit the context, since Jesus would have been promising eternal life to all who harm him or lie about him. Therefore, a figurative interpretation is untenable.



## Pagans in the New Testament

Christianity wasn't confined to Judea. It quickly expanded, especially through St. Paul's missionary journeys. The message that Jesus is the Messiah was preached first in synagogues, then to the pagans. What is a pagan? Pagans generally were non-Jewish idolaters (worshipping objects called idols as gods) and/or polytheists (believers in many gods).

### CHRISTIAN MIRACLES DIFFERENTIATED FROM MAGIC

#### TESTIMONY

Thus Philip went down to [the] city of Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah to them. With one accord, the crowds paid attention to what was said by Philip when they heard it and saw the signs he was doing. For unclean spirits, crying out in a loud voice, came out of many possessed people, and many paralyzed and crippled people were cured. There was great joy in that city. A man named Simon used to practice magic in the city and astounded the people of Samaria, claiming to be someone great. All of them, from the least to the greatest, paid attention to him, saying, "This man is the 'Power of God' that is called 'Great.'" They paid attention to him because he had astounded them by his magic for a long time, but once they began to believe Philip as he preached the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, men and women alike were baptized. Even Simon himself believed, and, after being baptized, became devoted to Philip; and when he saw the signs and mighty deeds that were occurring, he was astounded.

Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent them Peter and John, who went down and prayed for them, that they might receive the Holy Spirit, for it had not yet fallen upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. When Simon saw that the Spirit was conferred by the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money and said, "Give me this power too, so that anyone upon whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." But Peter said to him, "May your money perish with you, because you thought that you could buy the gift of God with money" (Acts 8:5–19).

This is the first recorded encounter between Christian missionaries and pagan magicians. Little is known about Simon the Magician (known in

Latin as *Simon Magnus*). According to Justin Martyr (A.D. 100–165), he came from the village of Gitta in Samaria.<sup>24</sup> Simon became famous for his magic.

The story in this passage pivots around the word “astounded” (Greek: *existimi*), which is used three times in Luke’s narrative. Simon *astounded* the people of Samaria, claiming to be someone great (Acts 8:9). The Samaritans paid attention to him because he *astounded* them with magic for a long time (Acts 8:11). Finally, Simon himself was *astounded* by the signs and mighty deeds of Philip (Acts 8:13). Later, wishing to acquire this power, Simon offered the apostles money so that they would give him their spiritual power, thus committing the first recorded act of simony.

#### HOSTILE WITNESS

There is an old saying: “It takes a thief to catch a thief.” Simon knew his craft well. He practiced magic in Samaria for a long time and won considerable fame. After astounding the Samaritans for years with his magic, he himself was astounded by the signs and mighty deeds wrought by Philip. Had Philip and the other Christians been practicing magic, as some of our later hostile witnesses will assert, it would seem strange that this seasoned veteran of the magical arts failed to notice it. Instead, Simon was won over as a believer (Acts 8:13). This point is seen even more clearly when Simon witnesses the manifestation of the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands by the apostles. This was so far beyond Simon’s experience as a magician that he even offered the apostles money to give him the same power.

Magic can be practiced by anyone. It’s just a question of learning the proper incantations and acquiring the proper objects to complete the ritual. By becoming Christian, Simon shows us that he recognized that this is not the case with Christian miracles. He understood that the signs and mighty deeds he witnessed were something unique to Christianity.

#### CHRISTIAN MIRACLES

##### TESTIMONY

At Lystra there was a crippled man, lame from birth, who had never walked. He listened to Paul speaking, who looked intently at him, saw that he had the faith to be healed, and called out in a loud voice, “Stand up straight on your feet.” He jumped up and began to walk about. When the crowds saw what Paul had done, they cried out in Lycaonian, “The gods have come

down to us in human form.” They called Barnabas “Zeus” and Paul “Hermes,” because he was the chief speaker (Acts 14:8–12).

Lystra was a city in the region of Lycaonia in the Roman province of Galatia in Asia Minor. Archeological evidence has confirmed that this pagan city had great devotion to the Greek gods Zeus and Hermes.

#### HOSTILE WITNESS

Have you ever wondered why, if the apostles really did perform miracles, the pagans didn’t attempt to make them gods? Well, that’s exactly what happened in the pagan town of Lystra. Paul healed a lifelong cripple, causing a great sensation. Earlier, when Peter and John cured another lifelong cripple at the temple gate, there was a similar reaction (Acts 3:1–11). In Paul and Barnabas’s case, because the man had been crippled from birth, a great number of people would have known the nature of his disability and that it was incurable. The fact that the people wanted to honor Paul and Barnabas as Zeus and Hermes attests that they understood this healing to be something supernatural.

#### AUTHENTICITY OF MIRACLES, RAPID GROWTH OF CHRISTIANITY

##### TESTIMONY

There was a silversmith named Demetrius who made miniature silver shrines of Artemis and provided no little work for the craftsmen. He called a meeting of these and other workers in related crafts and said, “Men, you know well that our prosperity derives from this work. As you can now see and hear, not only in Ephesus but throughout most of the province of Asia, this Paul has persuaded and misled a great number of people by saying that gods made by hands are not gods at all. The danger grows, not only that our business will be discredited, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be of no account, and that she whom the whole province of Asia and all the world worship will be stripped of her magnificence.” When they heard this, they were filled with fury and began to shout, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” The city was filled with confusion, and the people rushed with one accord into the theater, seizing Gaius and Aristarchus, the Macedonians, Paul’s traveling companions. Paul wanted to go before the crowd, but the disciples would not let him (Acts 19:24-30).

Paul traveled to Ephesus, an ancient Greek city located on the coast of Ionia, and preached and debated in its synagogues for three months (Acts 19:8). Afterward he directed his attention to the pagans for two years, with the result that nearly everyone, Jew and Greek, heard his message (Acts 19:10). During this time, Paul worked many extraordinary deeds (Acts

19:11–12). It was during this period that the seven sons of Sceva the high priest attempted an exorcism in Christ’s name.

Luke records a large number of conversions, including magicians who abandoned their magic arts and became Christian (Acts 19:18–19). Luke described this wave of conversion as spreading “with influence and power” throughout the region. It is here that Luke records the incident above.

The temple of the goddess Artemis was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It was a place of pilgrimage and a tourist attraction that played an important role in the local economy. Our hostile witnesses’ protest against the preaching of Paul soon spiraled out of control into a near-riot.

#### HOSTILE WITNESS

Fabrications tend to be one-dimensional. They usually touch only on a few details that serve the story and rarely attempt to duplicate the multifaceted cause-and-effect relationships that occur in real life. Luke’s main purpose for recording this event was to explain why Paul and his disciples left Ephesus for Macedonia. But Demetrius’s speech reveals something more.

Paul and his companions were teaching that “gods made by hands are not gods at all,” which called into question whether the Ephesian craftsmen’s idols served a legitimate purpose. Demetrius warned, “The danger grows, not only that our business will be discredited, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be of no account, and that she . . . will be stripped of her magnificence.” It’s not difficult to read between the lines and see Demetrius’s real concern. The explosive wave of conversions that Luke recorded in Acts 19:18–20 threatened his and his fellow craftsmen’s livelihoods—enough to provoke a near-riot in the city.

History doesn’t take place in a vacuum. Events affect people, philosophies, cultures, and in this instance economies. If every effect must have a sufficient cause, then what would have caused such a large wave of conversions to Christianity that they threatened the livelihood of craftsmen serving one of the seven wonders of the ancient world? Something powerful must have happened to cause so many conversions. But what? Luke provides the answer: the miraculous signs that accompanied Paul.

#### FURTHER READING

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<sup>24</sup> Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 1, 26, 56. ANF 1:171; *Dialogue with Trypho* 120, 6. ANF 1:61.

## Part II

# Early Pagan Testimony

Christianity took root in the Roman province of Judea. From early on, Christ and his disciples interacted with pagans. The most significant of those interactions was Jesus' crucifixion under the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate (d. ca. A.D. 37).

Christianity quickly began to spread outside of Judea to the rest of the Roman Empire. For the Roman elite, Christianity was just another form of Judaism, a troublesome sect and a strange superstition whose believers secretly practiced abominable things. Outside of the occasional disturbances caused by Christian missionaries, Roman historians had little interest in Christianity.

Several hostile witnesses in this part may be familiar, since they have attracted an enormous amount of attention in the field of "historical Jesus" research. Although most of that attention has focused on their direct testimony to basic Christian facts (such as Christ's crucifixion under Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius), they actually have much more to say about other important issues, especially some of the most common misunderstandings and mischaracterizations that are found today on the Internet and in television documentaries.

## Publius Cornelius Tacitus (A.D. 56–117) Roman Senator and Historian

Publius Cornelius Tacitus (A.D. ca. 56–117) is considered by many to be one of the greatest ancient Roman historians, both for the quality of his writing and for his careful use of public records, official reports, and contemporary testimony. As a Roman senator, he had special access to all of these sources, and he frequently uses them in his writings. Tacitus wrote two major historical works, *The Annals* (A.D. 109) and *The Histories* (ca. A.D. 100–110); both have survived only in fragments. Each work contains a reference to Christianity.

These passages are generally considered authentic. They fit their immediate context and they are written in Tacitus's unique style. Moreover, his marked hostility toward Christianity in these passages argues strongly in favor of their authenticity, since no Christian interpolating them later would have fabricated such disparaging remarks.

### FACTS OF THE GOSPEL, MIRACLES, AND THE RAPID SPREAD OF CHRISTIANITY TESTIMONY

But all human efforts, all the lavish gifts of the emperor, and the propitiations of the gods, did not banish the sinister belief that the conflagration was the result of an order. Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians [Latin: *Chrestianos*] by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their center and become popular. Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city as of hatred against mankind. Mockery of every sort was

added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired.

Nero offered his gardens for the spectacle, and was exhibiting a show in the circus, while he mingled with the people in the dress of a charioteer or stood aloft on a car. Hence, even for criminals who deserved extreme and exemplary punishment, there arose a feeling of compassion; for it was not, as it seemed, for the public good, but to glut one man's cruelty, that they were being destroyed.<sup>[25](#)</sup>

Tacitus mentions Christians in connection to Emperor Nero (A.D. 37–68). According to Tacitus, the Romans blamed Nero for the great fire that destroyed much of Rome in A.D. 64. After making several failed attempts to remove himself from suspicion, Nero decided on another tactic: he blamed the fire on the Christians. They were seen as a strange sect of fanatics, which made them excellent scapegoats. Since Christians may not have been familiar to his readers, Tacitus takes a moment to explain their origin and how the public viewed their persecution.

Tacitus identified the founder of Christianity as “Christus.” Although Tacitus doesn’t use it as such, Christus (or Christ) is actually a title that means “the Anointed” (Hebrew: *Messiah*). We know from Christian sources that Jesus’ followers were first called Christians sometime around A.D. 45–46 in Antioch (Acts 11:26). By the time Tacitus composed his *Annals*, “Christians” was a common name for Jesus’ followers and “Christ” had begun to be used as a proper name.<sup>[26](#)</sup>

#### HOSTILE WITNESS

Tacitus’s testimony speaks against several claims commonly made today. For example, it has become fashionable in some quarters to deny that Jesus ever existed. Yet Tacitus attests to Jesus’ being a real person who “suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus.” Tiberius reigned from A.D. 14–37, and Pontius Pilate was prefect from A.D. 26–36.<sup>[27](#)</sup> The extreme penalty refers to a death sentence; crucifixion would certainly fit this description.

Tacitus also notes that after the leader of the Christians suffered the “extreme penalty” the “most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the



moment, again broke out not only in Judea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome.” Remember, Tacitus was a pagan Roman historian and his perspective is that of a Roman official. As far as the Romans were concerned, the death of “Christus,” the ringleader, should have decapitated the sect and put a stop to Christianity once and for all. As we saw in chapter two, Rabban Gamaliel, the head of the Sanhedrin, believed essentially the same thing. But as it turned out, according to Tacitus, Christianity was “checked” only momentarily, and then “broke out again” (Latin: *russum erumpebat*) in Judea, and spread to Rome. Tacitus unwittingly raises a question that he didn’t think to ask: why did Christianity suddenly and vigorously break out again after its leaders had been executed? The answer, according to Christian sources, is that Christ isn’t dead, but is risen.

Tacitus’s short passage also indirectly suggests that the pagans were aware of Christian miracles. Originally, Christians were persecuted for setting the great fire, but as time went on they were persecuted “not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind” (Latin: *odio humani generis*). “Hatred of humanity” was a charge sometimes leveled against poisoners and magicians.<sup>28</sup> According to Julius Paulus, a Roman jurist, the severest penalties were given to those who practiced the magical arts; these penalties included being exposed to beasts, having one’s throat cut, and being burned alive.<sup>29</sup> Tacitus mentions two of these three punishments as being meted out to Christians. Throat-slitting was apparently replaced with crucifixion. We know from other sources that several early Christian martyrs suffered the same penalties. Ignatius of Antioch (A.D. ca. 35–108), for example, was executed by being torn apart by wild beasts; Polycarp of Smyrna (A.D. 69–155) was burned alive; and the apostle Peter was crucified in Rome (ca. A.D. 67–68).<sup>30</sup>

Why is this important? To the casual pagan onlooker, Christian miracles must have seemed like a strange form of magic that didn’t use incantations. If this is so, Tacitus’s passage suggests that the Roman leadership found it easier to make the charge of magic stick than the charge of setting the great fire. Why was it easier? Tacitus doesn’t tell us. It could be that Christians had already gained a reputation for miracles even among the pagans. This seems to fit with the evidence found among the New Testament witnesses, and also what we will see in later testimony (see chapter thirteen).

Another more recent attack on the credibility of Christianity is the charge that the gospel is an ancient fabrication blending various pagan myths and mystery religions with Judaism. Tacitus's passage also calls this idea into question. If there was anyone in antiquity qualified to uncover such a fabrication, it would have been Tacitus. In A.D. 88, he became a member of the council of priests known as the *Quindecimviri sacris faciundis*.<sup>31</sup> These priests were appointed to oversee non-Roman religions in the city. Therefore, Tacitus was well-informed about all the pagan myths and mystery religions. Yet his brief treatment of Christianity gives no hint that he thought Christianity was just another syncretistic religion employing myths and legends. Quite the opposite. Tacitus anchors the origin of Christianity in "Christus," a person he acknowledges as real, though whether he was real or mythical made no difference to Tacitus—he had nothing to gain or lose either way. It would have been very easy for him to say, "The Christians are akin to the such-and-such mystery cult." His pagan readers would have immediately understood what he meant. But he didn't.

Lastly, Tacitus says that the pagans viewed Christianity as "a class hated for their abominations." The historian never specifies exactly what these "abominations" might be. One candidate is the celebration of the Eucharist, in which Christians believed they were consuming Christ's actual body and blood (under the appearance of bread and wine). As we saw earlier, the hostile witnesses of Jesus' day, including some of his disciples, recoiled at this same teaching. In the next chapter, we will see another hostile witness, Pliny the Younger, who appears to have searched for one of these "abominations" being practiced in the Christian liturgy.

#### THE BELIEF IN THE IMMINENT ARRIVAL OF THE MESSIAH

##### TESTIMONY

Some few put a fearful meaning on these events, but in most there was a firm persuasion that in the ancient records of their priests was contained a prediction of how at this very time the East was to grow powerful, and rulers, coming from Judea, were to acquire universal empire. These mysterious prophecies had pointed to Vespasian and Titus, but the common people, with the usual blindness of ambition, had interpreted these mighty destinies of themselves and could not be brought even by disasters to believe the truth.<sup>32</sup>

The Jewish prophecy mentioned above is also referenced by two other hostile witnesses, the Jewish historian Josephus and the pagan Roman historian Suetonius (A.D. ca. 69–122). Since all three of these sources shed light on this belief, we are going to include and comment on their testimonies here rather than later on in their respective chapters.

#### HOSTILE WITNESS

Flavius Josephus's book *The Jewish War* chronicles the events of the first Jewish revolt (A.D. 66–72). About this Jewish messianic prophecy Josephus wrote,

Now if anyone consider these things, he will find that God takes care of mankind and by all ways possible foreshows to our race what is for their preservation; but that men perish by those miseries which they madly and voluntarily bring upon themselves; for the Jews, by demolishing the tower of Antonia, had made their temple four-square, while at the same time they had it written in their sacred oracles, "That then should their city be taken, as well as their holy house, when once their temple should become four-square." But now, what did the most [to] elevate them in undertaking this war, was an ambiguous oracle that was also found in their sacred writings, how, "about that time, one from their country should become governor of the habitable earth." The Jews took this prediction to belong to themselves in particular, and many of the wise men were thereby deceived in their determination. Now this oracle certainly denoted the government of Vespasian, who was appointed emperor in Judea.<sup>33</sup>

The pagan historian Suetonius also wrote,

There had spread over all the Orient an old and established belief that it was fated at that time for men coming from Judea to rule the world. This prediction, referring to the emperor of Rome, as afterward appeared from the event, the people of Judea took to themselves; accordingly they revolted and after killing their governor, they routed the consular ruler of Syria as well, when he came to the rescue, and took one of his eagles. Since to put down this rebellion required a considerable army with a leader of no little enterprise, yet one to whom so great power could be entrusted without risk, Vespasian was

chosen for the task, both as a man of tried energy and as one in no wise to be feared because of the obscurity of his family and name.<sup>[34](#)</sup>

The three hostile witnesses testify to the following points: There existed a Jewish prophecy that antedated the First Jewish Revolt (i.e., it was made before A.D. 66). The prophecy or oracle, in fact, was already considered ancient. Tacitus and Josephus suggest that it came from ancient priestly writings; Suetonius simply states that it was an “old and established belief.” The prophecy was widely known: Suetonius describes it as spread “over all the Orient”; Tacitus simply says, “in most [of the Jews] there was a firm persuasion.” The prophecy says that a ruler (or rulers) will come out of Judea. Tacitus and Suetonius speak of rulers (plural), whereas Josephus speaks of a single ruler. All agree that the belief was that this ruler (or rulers) would reign over the entire world (Tacitus: “acquire universal empire”; Suetonius: “rule the world”; Josephus: “become governor of the habitable earth”). All three historians claim that the prophecy was already fulfilled either by the Roman emperor Vespasian (Josephus, Suetonius) or by Vespasian and Titus (Tacitus). Finally, all three agree that the Jews believed that the prophecy referred to one who would arise from their nation.

Skeptics have long contested the idea that first-century Jews expected the Messiah’s arrival within their lifetime. The testimony of these three hostile witnesses shows that they did. According to these witnesses the oracle was ancient; Christian sources confirm this. At the beginning of the Christian era, Herod the Great was already acting upon messianic prophecies, attempting to stop the advent of the Messiah. By the 60s (A.D.) the expectation was so high that, according to Josephus, it motivated the zealots to wage a suicidal revolt against the world’s foremost power, the Roman empire. Moreover, the expectation was so great and well-known that it made its way to two of the most prominent pagan Roman historians, who applied it to their accounts of Vespasian and Titus.

One question remains: what exactly was this “ambiguous oracle”? None of the three hostile witnesses give enough detail to answer that exactly. The prophecies in the book of Daniel seem the most likely candidate, since they speak to the time of the Anointed One’s arrival and about the “Son of Man” receiving universal dominion.<sup>[35](#)</sup> If this is correct, the prophecies spoken of

by our hostile witnesses would be the same ones that Jesus applied to himself under questioning by the high priest (see chapter four).

25 *The Annals of Tacitus*, trans. Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodribb (London: MacMillan and Co., 1876), 304–305. *The Annals* 15:44.

26 R.E. Brown, J.A. Fitzmyer, and R.E. Murphy, eds., *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1996), 2:190.

27 Tacitus's description of Pilate as "procurator" seems to conflict with the *Pilate Stone*, which gives him the title prefect. Several scholars (Lifshitz, Brandon, Vardaman, Chilton, Evans, Carter, et al.) have proposed different ways to reconcile Tacitus's "procurator" with the *Pilate Stone*.

28 Ramsay, *The Church in the Roman Empire Before A.D. 170* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1893), 236n.

29 *Sentential of Julius Paullus*, 5, 23, 17.

30 Ignatius of Antioch (ca. A.D. 117), *Letter to the Romans*, 4; *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* (A.D. 155–160), 18. Peter's death, compare John 21:18; *Acts of Peter* (2nd cent.), 35; and Eusebius, *Church History*, 2, 25.

31 Robert Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament: An Introduction to the Ancient Evidence* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmann Publishing Co., 2000), 52.

32 *The History by Tacitus*, trans. Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodribb (Cambridge and London: MacMillan and Co., 1864), 273.

33 Josephus, *The Jewish War*, 6, 5, 4. *The Works of Flavius Josephus*, trans. C.W. Wilson (London: George Bell and Sons, 1890), 5:108.

34 Suetonius, *Vespasian*, 4, 5, in *Suetonius*, trans. J.C. Rolfe (Heinemann, 1998), 2:289.

35 John Joseph Collins, Peter W. Flint, and Cameron VanEpps, eds., *The Book of Daniel: Composition and Reception* (London: Brill Academic Publishers, 2002), 2:505.

Plinius Caecilius Secundus  
(Pliny the Younger) Roman Governor of Bithynia-  
Pontus (A.D. 61–112)

Pliny the Younger was the governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor, which is located in modern-day northern Turkey. He was governor from A.D. 111 to 113, and his position as a Roman administrator put him at odds with the early Christians, whose religion he considered to be an “excessive superstition.” Pliny’s extant works are found in the form of letters. He speaks of Christians in his letter to the emperor Trajan, which was written around A.D. 112.

CHRIST’S DIVINITY, THE SACRAMENTS, THE EUCHARIST

TESTIMONY

It is with me, sir, an established custom to refer to you all matters on which I am in doubt. Who, indeed, is better able, either to direct my scruples or to instruct my ignorance?

I have never been present at trials of Christians and consequently do not know for what reasons, or how far, punishment is usually inflicted or inquiry made in their case. . . . Meanwhile, in the case of those who have been brought before me in the character of Christians, my course has been as follows: I put it to themselves whether they were or were not Christians. To such as professed that they were, I put the inquiry a second and a third time, threatening them with the supreme penalty. Those who persisted, I ordered executed. For, indeed, I could not doubt, whatever might be the nature of that which they professed, that their pertinacity, at any rate, and inflexible obstinacy, ought to be punished. . . . [Those persons who professed to have been formerly Christian] affirmed, however, that this had been the sum, whether of their crime or their delusion; they had been in the habit of meeting together on a stated day, before sunrise, and of offering in turns a form of invocation to Christ, as to a god; also of binding themselves by an oath, not for any guilty purpose, but not to commit thefts, or robberies, or adulteries, not to break their word, not to repudiate deposits when

called upon; these ceremonies having been gone through, they had been in the habit of separating, and again meeting together for the purpose of taking food—food, that is, of an ordinary and innocent kind. They had, however, ceased from doing even this after my edict, in which, following your orders, I had forbidden the existence of fraternities. This made me think it all the more necessary to inquire, even by torture, of two maid-servants who were styled as deaconesses what the truth was. I could discover nothing else than a vicious and extravagant superstition.<sup>36</sup>

Pliny the Younger wrote to the emperor Trajan (A.D. 53–117) for advice on what to do with the Christians. He recounts how he conducted his own investigation and discovered that Christians didn't seem to do anything warranting capital punishment. He learned this information from ex-Christians and two Christian deaconesses who were tortured during interrogation.

#### HOSTILE WITNESS

Pliny's description of Christian worship reveals several points that are sometimes disputed today. For example, he writes that Christians gather together on a set day of the week and sing to Christ "as to a god." What Pliny, a polytheist, means by this is that they sing to Christ as God (since Christianity, like Judaism, is monotheistic). Secular writers and marginal liberal theologians claim that Christ wasn't considered to be divine in the first century, only hundreds of years later. Pliny's investigation uncovered that Christians were already worshipping Jesus as God in their liturgy around A.D. 112. This should be of no surprise, since the practice goes much further back. Paul in his Letter to the Philippians (ca. A.D. 49–51), for example, quotes a hymn that also proclaims Christ as God:

Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. Because of this, God greatly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, of those in heaven and on earth and



under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:6–11).

The rhythmic quality and parallelism in this passage shows that Paul is quoting a Christian liturgical hymn. The hymn certainly predates Paul's letter, which would put its date of composition very close to the time of the Resurrection. Pliny's remarks, therefore, merely confirm what was by then a long-standing practice.

Pliny's testimony shows not only that early Christian worship was liturgical, but that it was sacramental. According to Pliny, the Christians "[bind] themselves by an oath, not for any guilty purpose, but not to commit thefts, or robberies, or adulteries, not to break their word, not to repudiate deposits when called upon" (emphasis mine). The phrase "bind themselves by oath" (Latin: *dicere secum invicem seque sacramento*) can also be translated as "they involve themselves in a sacrament." As Scott Hahn notes:

In a tradition that dates back to the late first and early second century, the Latin word *sacramentum* was used to describe the binding "oaths" sworn by Christians in the eucharistic liturgy and the other sacramental liturgies. Among other ancient authorities, this usage can be found in Tertullian, Augustine, Jerome, Leo the Great, and Pliny the Younger. *Sacramentum* was also used to translate the early Christian term for the sacraments or "mysteries" (Greek: *mysterion*).<sup>37</sup>

Swearing oaths was how the ancient Jews made a covenant. In Christian worship, therefore, believers renew their covenant with God by involving themselves in a sacrament.<sup>38</sup>

#### THE INTEGRITY OF THE CHRISTIAN WITNESS

Another often-overlooked aspect of Pliny's testimony is that the Christian oath or *sacramentum* made during the celebration of the Eucharist bound Christians not to commit fraud (that is, lie or deceive). Not only does the Eucharist go back all the way to the Last Supper when Jesus established it (1 Cor. 11:23–25), but the condemnation of lying and deceit was always at the core of Christian ethics.<sup>39</sup> Jesus labeled liars as the offspring of the devil (John 8:44), and the book of Revelation teaches that those who practice any kind of deceit will be thrown into the lake of fire at the end of



time (Rev. 21:8, 27; 22:15). What should have bothered Pliny, if he had thought more about it, was how this deeply rooted oath-bound commitment never to commit a fraud squared with the Christians' claim that their "excessive superstition" was based on truth. Why would Christians, who were so scrupulous about not lying or deceiving, propagate a fraud?

#### THE EUCHARIST

Pliny also sheds light on Tacitus's oblique comment about Christians practicing "abominations." Although he doesn't identify any specific abominations, his words are nevertheless revealing in that regard. After mentioning elements of Christian worship, Pliny says, perhaps with some relief, that the Christians partake of "food, that is, of an ordinary and innocent kind." What did the governor of Bithynia expect Christians to be eating? Apparently, he believed that it was something unusual for a person to eat and also that warranted punishment. Later Christian and hostile pagan sources help fill in the blank for us. The pagans believed that Christians met to engage in some form of cannibalism.<sup>40</sup>

Earlier, we encountered hostile witnesses in the New Testament who had serious problems accepting Christ's words in the Bread of Life Discourse. They objected, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" (John 6:52; see chapter four.) A purely symbolic understanding of the Eucharist would hardly have raised a Jewish or pagan eyebrow, since both were very familiar with ritual symbolism. The charge of cannibalism, however, could only be understandable if the earliest Christians believed in Christ's real substantial presence in the Eucharist. The same is true today. Catholics never accuse Baptists of practicing cannibalism because Baptists believe that the Eucharist is nothing more than a symbol. But Baptists sometimes accuse Catholics (as well as Orthodox, Lutherans, and others who believe in a real substantial presence) of engaging in cannibalism. Pliny's and Tacitus's remarks suggest that the earliest Christians believed in a real substantial presence. Some of the earliest post-biblical Christian writings affirm this. Ignatius of Antioch, who was a contemporary of Pliny and Tacitus, condemned heretical Christians who "refrain from the Eucharist and prayer because they do not confess that the Eucharist is the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ, which suffered for our sins, which the Father in his

goodness raised up.”<sup>41</sup> It’s easy to see how a pagan could have misconstrued such statements as advocating a form of cannibalism.

Pliny the Younger, therefore, attests that Christians were professing and worshipping Jesus as God at the very beginning of the second century, that their form of worship was liturgical and sacramental, and that they understood Christ to be present in the Eucharist in a very real and substantial manner.

## RAPID GROWTH OF CHRISTIANITY

### TESTIMONY

Consequently, having adjourned the inquiry, I have had recourse to your counsels. Indeed, the matter seemed to me a proper one for consultation, chiefly on account of the number of persons imperiled. For many of all ages and all ranks, ay, and of both sexes, are being called, and will be called, into danger. Nor are cities only permeated by the contagion of this superstition, but villages and country parts as well; yet it seems possible to stop it and cure it. It is in truth sufficiently evident that the temples, which were almost entirely deserted, have begun to be frequented, that the customary religious rites which had long been interrupted are being resumed, and that there is a sale for the food of sacrificial beasts, for which hitherto very few buyers indeed could be found. From all this it is easy to form an opinion as to the great numbers of persons who may be reclaimed, if only room be granted for penitence.<sup>42</sup>

Although Pliny found nothing worthy of death in his investigations, he didn’t necessarily wish for the persecution of Christians to end. The end of his letter suggests that Pliny believed the persecution had already begun to stem the tide of mass conversions to Christianity, and that people were once again returning to the pagan worship they had abandoned.

### HOSTILE WITNESS

Why did Pliny consult Trajan? To be sure, he had questions about how to handle Christians, and maybe even had some doubts as to whether the Bithynian Christians warranted capital punishment. He also saw the persecution of the Christians as a good thing, since it seemed to slow down, or even reverse, the tide of conversions that spread through Bithynia, affecting not only urban areas “but villages and country parts as well.”

Was Pliny exaggerating Christianity's explosive growth, or was he dealing with a real problem? The answer to this can be found in the closing lines of his letter. Pagans who converted to Christianity naturally would abandon pagan worship altogether, leaving, as Pliny notes, pagan temples abandoned. But what about the animal markets that supplied the sacrificial victims for pagan rituals? What happened to them? Obviously, there would be a sharp drop in purchases of such animals, which would upset the local economy. Earlier, we saw the wave of Christian conversion exerting economic pressures on the Ephesians' micro-economy of craftsmen associated with the cult of Artemis. Pliny was apparently experiencing the same kind of economic downturn in Bithynia. It is not difficult to see this in Pliny's closing lines to the emperor Trajan: "the customary religious rites which had long been interrupted are being resumed, *and that there is a sale for the food of sacrificial beasts, for which hitherto very few buyers indeed could be found*" (emphasis mine). The suppression of Christians was good for pagan commerce. Therefore, Pliny was not exaggerating about the impressive growth of Christianity; he was dealing with a real-life problem. Reading between these lines, it appears that Pliny was hoping Trajan would continue the persecution so that health could be restored to those markets hardest hit by these conversions.

Other sources also speak of the enormous growth of Christianity. Tacitus, for example, characterized the Christians in Rome back during Nero's reign (ca. A.D. 64) as an "immense multitude." The Christian writer Justin Martyr (A.D. 100–165) in his *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew* (ca. A.D. 150), wrote concerning the Christian fulfillment of Malachi 1:11,

But you and your teachers fool yourselves when you explain this passage of Scripture as referring to the Jews of the Dispersion and affirm that it says their prayers and sacrifices were pure and acceptable in every place. You should realize that you are uttering lies and are striving in every way to deceive yourselves. In the first place, your nation does not even now extend from the rising of the sun to the going down thereof, for there are nations among which none of your race has ever yet lived. But there is not one single race of men—whether barbarians, or Greeks, or persons called by any other name, nomads, or vagabonds, or herdsmen dwelling in tents—among whom

prayers and thanksgivings are not offered to the Father and Creator of the universe in the name of the crucified Jesus.<sup>[43](#)</sup>

Justin argues, assuming that Trypho and his companions would concede, that Christianity had already (ca. A.D. 150) superseded the Jewish Diaspora in number and geographical area.

A generation later, in A.D. 197, Tertullian reported in his *Apology* to the provincial governors of the Roman empire that the outcry is that the State is filled with Christians—that they are in the fields, in the citadels, in the islands: they make lamentation, as for some calamity, that both sexes, every age and condition, even high rank, are passing over to the profession of the Christian faith.<sup>[44](#)</sup>

Later he observes,

We are but of yesterday, and we have filled every place among you—cities, islands, fortresses, towns, market-places, the very camp, tribes, companies, palace, senate, forum—we have left nothing to you but the temples of your gods.<sup>[45](#)</sup>

The statements of Justin and Tertullian are often dismissed as hyperbole, over-exaggerations designed to add a certain punch to their defense of Christianity. Our hostile witnesses call such dismissive statements into question. Pliny had no love for Christianity and yet his statements mirror that of Tacitus, Justin, and Tertullian. He wasn't exaggerating. He was dealing with a real problem.

<sup>[36](#)</sup> Pliny, *Letters of the Younger Pliny*, trans. John D. Lewis (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, & Co., 1890), 378–9.

<sup>[37](#)</sup> Scott W. Hahn, *The Kingdom of God as Liturgical Empire: A Theological Commentary on 1–2 Chronicles* (Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 163.

<sup>[38](#)</sup> Early Christian worship, like that of Judaism, was liturgical. Acts 2:42 describes the worship of the first Christians as devoting themselves to the teachings of the apostles, to the breaking of bread, and “to the prayers” (emphasis mine). The use of the article suggests that they used specific (i.e., liturgical) prayers.

<sup>[39](#)</sup> Paul's first letter to the Corinthians was written around A.D. 55. However, the tradition Paul is quoting originated much earlier.

<sup>[40](#)</sup> The pagan writer Caecilius notes in a speech that a man named Marcus Cornelius Fronto (A.D. 100–166) identified Christian worship as involving ritual murder and cannibalism (Stephen Banko, *Pagan Rome and Early Christians* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 60; cf. Minicius Felix's *Octavius* 31, 1–2). Fronto was a rhetorician, orator, and Roman consul. One may discern through Fronto's inflammatory remarks a highly distorted and superficial understanding of Christian worship. For example, the charge of sexual immorality and incest likely came from the combination

of the Christian teaching that they are all “brothers and sisters” and that they gathered together in what was called “love feasts.” The charge of infanticide came from a distorted understanding of infant baptism. Ritual murder and cannibalism, likewise, came from a misunderstanding of Christ’s Real Presence in the Eucharist.

41 Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Smyrnaeans*, 7, 2. ANF 1:89.

42 Pliny, *Letters of the Younger Pliny*, 379.

43 Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 117. ANF 1:258.

44 Tertullian, *Apology*, 1. ANF 3:17.

45 Tertullian, *Apology*, 37. ANF 3:45.

## Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus (ca. A.D. 69–122) Roman Historian

Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus (ca. 69–ca. 122) was a Roman historian who wrote *The Life of the Caesars* (*De Vita Caesarum*), which chronicled the lives of twelve successive Roman rulers from Julius Caesar to Domitian. Suetonius was also a friend of Pliny the Younger.

### EARLY CHRISTIAN EVANGELISM IN ROME

#### TESTIMONY

He [Claudius] banished from Rome all the Jews, who were continually making disturbances at the instigation of one Chrestus.[46](#)

Suetonius's short reference to Christ, or rather Christians, is recorded in the book dedicated to the emperor Claudius, who reigned from A.D. 44 to 54. Claudius's edict expelling the Jews from Rome took place in A.D. 49.

An incredible amount of ink has been spilled over these few lines. Most of the controversy surrounds the identification of *Chrestus*. Some scholars dispute whether this Chrestus refers to Christ. The three most important reasons are: Chrestus was a common name at that time; Suetonius was using Chrestus as a proper name and not a title; and the Latin spelling of Christ was usually *Christus*, not Chrestus. None of these objections are insurmountable. Even if Chrestus were a common name, it only raises the possibility that it could be someone else. It doesn't rule out the possibility that it refers to Christ. As for *Christ* being used as a name instead of a title, the practice by this date appears to be fairly common. Tacitus did the same (see chapter seven). Since both Suetonius and Tacitus were pagan and unfamiliar with Hebrew, the mistake is understandable. Even today, some people think that Christ is Jesus' surname! As for the odd spelling, it is true that Christ at that time was usually spelled Christus. Chrestus, however, seems to have been a common misspelling among pagans. For example, the Christian writer Lactantius (240–320) notes that in his day pagans still mistakenly call Christ Chrestus:

He is called Jesus . . . for Christ is not a proper name, but a title . . . But the meaning of this name must be set forth, on account of the error of the ignorant, who by the change of a letter are accustomed to call him Chrestus.[47](#)

Tertullian, who lived closer to the time of Suetonius, encountered the same pagan misspelling in regards to Christians:

The name *Christian*, however, so far as its meaning goes, bears the sense of anointing. Even when by a faulty pronunciation you [pagans] call us “Chrestians” (for you are not certain about even the sound of this noted name), you in fact lisp out the sense of pleasantness and goodness.[48](#)

If Christians were mistakenly called “Chrestians” then it seems reasonable that the pagans would assume that their namesake, Christ, would be Chrestus rather than Christus.

#### HOSTILE WITNESS

Suetonius’s ignorance of Christianity clouds his short reference, so let’s look a little closer at what he wrote.

We know that the emperor Claudius did indeed expel all Jews from Rome. The expulsion is even mentioned in an off-handed comment in the Acts of the Apostles:

There [in Corinth] he [Paul] met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome (Acts 18:2).

As for the disturbances Suetonius mentions, we have to understand the pagan historian’s perspective. Being of pagan extraction, he most likely knew very little about Jewish beliefs, much less the claims of Christianity. All he could report was that these disturbances were caused by Chrestus, which he took to be a proper name. Perhaps without knowing it, Suetonius identified the very crux of all these disturbances. To explain, we need to look at Christian sources.

One of the earliest and greatest Christian evangelists was St. Paul, who was a highly trained and devoted Jew who came to believe that Jesus of Nazareth was the promised Messiah. His companion, Luke, chronicled

Paul's Christian missionary journeys and summarized in Acts 17:23 how Paul would evangelize:

Following his usual custom, Paul joined them [the Jews], and for three Sabbaths he entered into discussions with them from Scripture, expounding and demonstrating that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead and that "This is the Messiah, Jesus, whom I proclaim to you."

Notice the emphasis on the word "Messiah" (from which we get the word "Christ"). Both Jews and Christians believe in the Messiah, but in mutually exclusive ways. Jews believe in the Messiah *who is to come* and Christians believe in the Messiah *who has come and will come again*. Therefore, the question of whether the Messiah has come is at the heart of the Christian-Jewish dispute, which explains why Paul and the other Christian missionaries focused on this point in their missionary work.

These disputes between Christian and Jews about the Messiah (Greek: *Christos*) may have sounded to pagan ears like a quarrel over a person named *Christos* (or *Chrestus*). These disputes must have become frequent and heated enough that Claudius needed to take action and expel the Jews from the city.

Suetonius, therefore, appears to have affirmed, in only a few words, the existence of Christian missionary activity in Rome around A.D. 49 and the disturbances they may have caused that led to Claudius' expulsion.

<sup>46</sup> Suetonius, "Claudius," in *Life of the Caesars*, trans. Alexander Thomas (London: George Bell and Sons, 1890), 318. The original Latin: *Iudaeos impulsore Chresto assidue tumultuantis Roma expulit*.

<sup>47</sup> Lactantius, *Institutes*, 4, 7 (ca. A.D. 303–311). ANF 7:106.

<sup>48</sup> Tertullian, *Ad Nationes*, 1, 3. ANF 3:110. The Greek word *chrestos* means pleasant or good.



## The Nazareth Inscription (1st Century)

Our next hostile witness isn't a person. It's a 24 by 15 inch marble table, discovered in Nazareth in 1878, containing an "ordinance of Caesar." Dating the stone is difficult. Which Caesar is not identified, nor does the stone contain a date or any datable reference. Roman rule did not come to Galilee until A.D. 44, which would make the inscription an edict of Claudius, who reigned A.D. 41–54. The style of the lettering dates it sometime between 50 B.C. to A.D. 50, a span that includes part of Claudius's reign. Claudius, as we have learned from Suetonius, was no stranger to Jewish controversies and this rescript may be just another intervention within the Jewish community.

### THE EMPTY TOMB

#### TESTIMONY

It is my decision [concerning] graves and tombs—whoever has made them for the religious observances of parents, or children, or household members—that these remain undisturbed forever. But if anyone legally charges that another person has destroyed, or has in any manner extracted those who have been buried, or has moved with wicked intent those who have been buried to other places, committing a crime against them, or has moved sepulcher-sealing stones, against such a person, I order that a judicial tribunal be created, just as [is done] concerning the gods in human religious observances, even more so will it be obligatory to treat with honor those who have been entombed. You are absolutely not to allow anyone to move [those who have been entombed]. But if [someone does], I wish that [violator] to suffer capital punishment under the title of tomb-breaker.[49](#)

The inscription, if authentic, appears to be a portion of an imperial rescript. A rescript is a letter from the emperor addressing a point of inquiry posed by a Roman official. Such letters would have the force of law in that region, much like the emperor Trajan's response to Pliny the Younger's inquiry.

The Nazareth Inscription makes any person found guilty of destroying, extracting, or moving with “wicked intent,” or of moving “sepulcher-sealing stones,” to be punishable by death. There are several oddities with this decree.

First, there’s no mention of grave robbery, which occasionally happened in the ancient Middle East. The rescript’s concern was with the unsealing of a grave and/or moving a corpse for some fraudulent purpose. The rescript also appears to be concerned specifically with the tampering with Jewish tombs, since most pagans cremated their dead and placed their ashes in urns. The rescript also mentions family tombs, of which according to Clyde Billington “there are no known examples . . . like those in Second Temple Israel, to be found among the other ethnic groups of the Roman Empire.”<sup>50</sup> Since Jewish burial practices changed after the destruction of the temple, the rescript must have been issued before A.D. 70. The rescript also contains an important qualification. It only condemns those who unsealed a tomb and moved a body to another location “with wicked intent.” In other words, the rescript isn’t concerned about the possible desecration of the remains, but about the use of the remains to perpetrate a crime, such as fraud or some sort of extortion.

The Nazareth Inscription is also unique in the punishment it prescribes. Rome already had laws regarding disturbing a tomb. It was considered a crime of sacrilege, and the penalty was usually a fine. But the Nazareth Inscription makes removing a body with wicked intent a capital crime. What would have warranted changing the punishment from a slap-on-the-wrist to a capital offense?

#### HOSTILE WITNESS

Laws often become more strict and far-reaching after a major incident has occurred. For example, kidnapping was always a crime in the United States; however, several states made harming a kidnap victim a capital offense after the famous Lindbergh kidnapping in the 1930s. Similarly, Roman law already had regulations and procedures to deal with disturbing tombs. But the Nazareth Inscription appears to be a legal rescript, specifically aimed at Jewish tombs, that makes moving a dead body with wicked intent a crime punishable by death. Something happened to provoke this rescript in this

region at this time. History provides only one incident involving an empty tomb in Judea big enough to warrant this rescript: the empty tomb of Jesus.

Earlier, we saw two New Testament hostile witnesses who touch on this subject. In the first instance, the Jews had approached Pilate to secure and seal Jesus' tomb in order to prevent Christ's disciples from stealing his body. In the second instance, bribes were offered to the soldiers guarding Jesus' tomb (and later, perhaps, to their superiors) to say that his disciples stole his body. The rumor that the disciples stole the body persisted for some time<sup>51</sup> (see chapter four). Could it be that this rumor made its way to the emperor Claudius, who being no stranger to dealing with Jewish problems, issued this rescript to prevent future such occurrences?

#### CONCLUSION

Early pagan historians regarded Christianity with indifference. They only mentioned it when it intruded on pagan society in some way. But despite their indifference, they provided evidence that speaks to certain continuing controversies today.

The first controversy is over whether Jesus Christ actually existed. All of our early pagan writers attest that he did. And although they were far more familiar with pagan myths and mystery cults than we are today, they didn't consider Christianity a patchwork of pagan myths; rather, they understood it to be a Jewish sect that believed certain superstitions.

Our hostile witnesses in this part affirm, with just a few notable differences, the core elements of the gospel: Jesus lived during the reign of Tiberius (Luke 3:1), suffered under Pontius Pilate (Matt. 27:2ff; Mark 15:15; Luke 3:1; et al.), and endured the extreme penalty (crucifixion). After his death, when his followers were thought to have dispersed, the movement broke out again and spread beyond Judea. His followers were called Christians (coming from the word "Christ") (Acts 11:26) and sang hymns to Christ as God (Phil. 2:6–11). Christian evangelism caused disturbances among the Jews (Acts 3:1–15; 4:1–3, 8–10; 5:28–30; 7:2–59; 13:27–46; 14:1–6; et al.). The proclamation of the gospel was accompanied by confirming signs and miracles (Acts 3:4–9; 5:12–42; 8:5–13; 9:17–18, 32–42; 12:5–13; 13:8–11; 14:9–13; 16:25–33; 19:11–12), and the number of converts rapidly grew.

In addition to confirming these general claims, these early hostile witnesses also attest to the Christian belief in Christ's Real and substantial Presence in the Eucharist. This can be inferred from Tacitus's assertion that Christians practiced some sort of "abomination" when they gathered together in worship, together with Pliny's observation that the Christians partake only of "ordinary and innocent food" (revealing that it was rumored they partook of something that was not ordinarily eaten and perhaps unlawful to eat). When Tacitus's and Pliny's reports are viewed in the context of the New Testament hostile witnesses at Christ's Bread of Life Discourse (John 6), it becomes clear that the early Christians were suspected of practicing cannibalism. The belief that the Eucharist is "the flesh and the blood of that Incarnate Jesus," was certain to cause misunderstanding among nonbelievers.<sup>52</sup>

The hostile witnesses in this part also attest that there was an explosion of conversions to Christianity whose effects were being felt in Rome and elsewhere. Tacitus says that Christianity, once checked in Judea, "broke out" to spread to Rome where an "immense multitude" of Christians lived during the time of Nero. Pliny the Younger likened the tide of conversions to Christianity to the spread of an infectious disease. Because of the numbers involved and the economic impact of these conversions to Christianity, Pliny the Younger felt it necessary to write to the emperor for advice. Even Suetonius's short passage suggests that the disturbances among the Jews instigated by "Chrestus" must have been big enough to require the emperor Claudius to expel the Jews from Rome. All of these testimonies point to an extraordinary growth and expansion of Christianity from the time of Nero to Trajan (middle first and early second Christian centuries).

What caused this tidal wave of conversions? Christian sources attribute it to the truth of the gospel (Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah and Son of God, who died under Pontius Pilate, rose again, and reigns in heaven) and that "the Lord worked with them [the apostles] and confirmed the word through accompanying signs" (Mark 16:20; Acts 2:43; 4:29–30; 5:12; 6:8; 14:3; 19:10; Rom. 15:19). Our early pagan writers didn't speak directly about miracles, but Tacitus's suggests that Christians may have been punished for practicing magic. If so, this would add credence to the miracles mentioned in Christian sources.

#### FURTHER READING

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<sup>49</sup> Translation from Clyde E. Billington's "The Nazareth Inscription: Proof of the Resurrection of Christ? Part 1," online at Associates for Biblical Research (<http://www.biblearchaeology.org/post/2009/07/22/The-Nazareth-Inscription-Proof-of-the-Resurrection-of-Christ.aspx#Article>). Accessed July 22, 2009. Used with permission from the author.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Chrysostom, *Letters of Chrysostom to the Olympians, To My Lady*. ANF 9:292. "For the story prevailed at that time, although it was a fabrication, and was bought for money; nevertheless it held its ground amongst some people, after the seals (of the sepulcher were broken) after the manifest appearance of the truth."

<sup>52</sup> Justin Martyr (ca. A.D. 150), *First Apology*, 66. ANF 1:185.

### Part III

## Early Jewish and Rabbinical Writings

The early pagans weren't the only hostile witnesses in the first and second centuries. We also possess Jewish writings that speak to Christ and Christianity, beginning with the first-century Jewish historian Titus Flavius Josephus. We already encountered Josephus in the last part, with reference to an ancient Jewish prophecy that a leader (or leaders) of the entire world would come from Judea in the first century. Josephus's most important passage for Christians is called the *Testimonium Flavianum*, in which he speaks about Jesus in some detail. Josephus lived near the time of Christ and his testimony about Jesus may be considered an independent witness to his life, death, and resurrection. For this reason, it has been the subject of considerable study and debate.

This part also includes a series of passages relating to Christianity that derive from Jewish oral tradition and were recorded in the Mishnah and Talmud.

## Titus Flavius Josephus (ca. A.D. 37–100) Soldier and Jewish Historian

Flavius Josephus was a soldier during the First Jewish Revolt (ca. A.D. 66–73), which was the first major effort by the Jews to throw off the shackles of Roman occupation. Josephus led a Jewish force stationed in Galilee, but he was forced to surrender to the Roman general Vespasian in A.D. 67. Vespasian took Josephus as a slave, and when Vespasian became emperor in A.D. 69 he granted Josephus his freedom and gave him Roman citizenship. Accompanying Vespasian's son Titus, Josephus witnessed the siege and fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. His two major historical works are *The Jewish War* (ca. A.D. 75) and *Antiquities of the Jews* (ca. A.D. 94). It is this latter work that contains three important passages that we will examine.

### JOHN THE BAPTIST AND HEROD ANTIPAS

#### TESTIMONY

Now some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod's army came from God, and that very justly, as a punishment of what he did against John, that was called the Baptist: for Herod slew him, who was a good man. . . .

Herod, who feared lest the great influence John had over the people might put it into his power and inclination to raise a rebellion. . . . Accordingly he was sent a prisoner, out of Herod's suspicious temper, to Macherus, the castle I before mentioned, and was there put to death.<sup>53</sup>

The passage above is generally accepted as authentic. There's no reference to Christ or his disciples, but its affirmation of John the Baptist's existence and his martyrdom under Herod Antipas indirectly helps support the veracity of the Gospels, since John played an important role in Jesus' life and ministry.

#### HOSTILE WITNESS

John the Baptist is a key figure found in all four Gospels. His life and mission form an integral part of Jesus' life and mission. He was born around 4 B.C., the child of Zechariah the priest and Elizabeth, a kinswoman

of Jesus' mother Mary. Around A.D. 27, John received a prophetic call to prepare the way for the Messiah (Mark 1:2–4; Luke 1:17). Some considered John a candidate for being the Messiah, but he denied it (John 1:19–27). Jesus and John interact at several points in the Gospel, such as when John baptized Jesus (Matt. 3:13–16; Mark 1:9–11; Luke 3:21–23) and John's inquiry about Jesus from prison (Matt. 11:2–5).

The fact that Josephus mentions John lends credence to Jesus being a real historical figure. Josephus's passage also, in a more general way, confirms basic facts about John that are found in the Gospels—for example, that John is said to be a just man (Matt. 21:32; Mark 6:20; Luke 7:28–30); that John enjoyed a good measure of popularity and influence (Matt. 3:5–7; 11:7; 14:5; Mark 1:4–5; Luke 3:3, 7, 15; John 1:19–22); and that Herod Antipas was responsible for his death (Matt. 14:3–5, 10; Mark 6:20–27; Luke 9:9) (see chapter two).

Josephus's rather brief account also offers information that is not found in the Gospels. This information is sometimes characterized as contradicting the Gospels, but the opposite is true. The Gospels identify John's preaching against Herod Antipas's illicit marriage to Herodias as the reason for his execution (Matt. 14:4–5; Mark 6:18). Josephus says that Herod feared John's influence over the people, which could have spiraled into a rebellion against the king. John's popularity wouldn't have been a threat unless Herod had reason to believe that John opposed him in some way. The Gospels supply that reason: John opposed the king's marriage as being contrary to the Law.

The only real difference between Josephus and the Gospels is that of perspective. Josephus focused on Herod's political concerns. The Gospels focus on the religious controversy that underlay Herod's political fears. Both views fit neatly together.

## THE DEATH OF JAMES

### TESTIMONY

And now Caesar, upon hearing the death of Festus, sent Albinus into Judea, as procurator. But the king deprived Joseph of the high priesthood, and bestowed the succession to that dignity on the son of Ananus, who was also himself called Ananus. . . . Festus was now dead, and Albinus was but upon the road; so he assembled the



Sanhedrin of judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others; and when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned.<sup>54</sup>

The authenticity of this passage has been contested; there are arguments both for and against, yet none are decisive. Much of the debate surrounds Josephus calling James “the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ.” Critics claim that Christ (Greek: *Christos*) would have been an unusual word for Josephus to use. Those in favor of the passage’s authenticity claim that Josephus needed to specify which Jesus (a common name at the time) James was related to. When Josephus identifies Jesus as “the one called Christ,” he implies that he had already identified this Jesus in a previous passage in *Antiquities*; his identification here is fitting.

#### HOSTILE WITNESS

Like the John the Baptist passage, this passage confirms the historicity of another biblical figure closely associated with Jesus. James, like John, was a relative of Jesus, and Josephus’s comments about him suggest that he was a fairly well known and important figure.

#### MESSIAH, MIRACLES, RESURRECTION

#### TESTIMONY

Now there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man; for he was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews and many of the Gentiles. He was [the] Christ. And when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him; for he appeared to them alive again the third day; as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him. And the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day.<sup>55</sup>

There is no other ancient extra-biblical text that has been more hotly debated than this passage from Josephus. It is known as the *Testimonium Flavium* (Testimony of Flavius [Josephus]). It is beyond the scope of this book to present all the arguments on both sides of the debate. Generally

speaking, there are three basic positions taken toward Josephus's *Testimonium*: that it is totally authentic, partially authentic, or inauthentic.

A majority of scholars affirm partial authenticity, although there is considerable debate as to which parts are authentic and which ones are later Christian interpolations. What constitutes an inauthentic interpolation boils down to an educated guess about what a non-Christian Jew would likely say about Jesus. Would he say that Jesus was a wonder-worker? Would he raise the rhetorical question "if he could be called a man"? Would he note that the prophets spoke about him or called Jesus "the Christ"?

In 1972, help on this issue came by way of a study conducted by Dr. Schlomo Pines of a tenth-century Arabic version of this passage. The text differs from the Greek text (cited above), and it seems to omit some of the more difficult lines that have caused doubt as to its authenticity. The text reads,

At this time there was a wise man who was called Jesus. And his conduct was good and (he) was known to be virtuous. And many people from among the Jews and other nations became his disciples. Pilate condemned him to be crucified and to die. And those who had become his disciples did not abandon his discipleship. They report that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion and that he was alive; accordingly, he was perhaps the Messiah concerning whom the prophets have recounted wonders.

More recently, a reconstruction proposed by John Meier has gained support among scholars. It reads,

At that time there appeared Jesus, a wise man. For he was a doer of startling deeds, a teacher of people who receive the truth with pleasure. And he gained a following both among many Jews and among many of Greek origin. And when Pilate, because of an accusation made by the leading men among us, condemned him to the cross, those who had loved him previously did not cease to do so. And up until this very day the tribe of Christians (named after him) has not died out.<sup>56</sup>

Meier's reconstruction and the Greek text agree on several points: Jesus was an actual person. He was considered wise. He performed miraculous deeds and wonders and had a sizable following. He was condemned to

death by Pilate after being accused by “leading men among us.” He was crucified, and “those who loved him” continued to do so in Josephus’s day. His followers are named Christians.

#### HOSTILE WITNESS

Josephus’s account fits very well with what we have seen from previous hostile witnesses. They all believe that Jesus was a real person who lived in Galilee, worked miracles (“startling deeds”), and was crucified under Pontius Pilate.

Josephus also found it worth noting that Jesus’ followers did not disband after his death. This last point may have given Josephus pause since he, more than any other person, knew of the many first-century pseudo-messiahs that appeared in Judea, such as Judas ben Hezekiah,<sup>57</sup> Simon of Perea,<sup>58</sup> Athronges the shepherd,<sup>59</sup> an unnamed Egyptian false prophet,<sup>60</sup> an unknown Samaritan prophet,<sup>61</sup> another unnamed “prophet,”<sup>62</sup> Menahem,<sup>63</sup> John of Gischala,<sup>64</sup> Simon bar Giora,<sup>65</sup> and Jonathan the weaver.<sup>66</sup> All of these leaders gained a following but were killed or disappeared, soon after which their followers disbanded. As we saw in chapter two, Rabban Gamaliel I (ca. A.D. 20–50) recognized this pattern and speculated that if Christianity was of human origin it would soon die out.<sup>67</sup> Tacitus, too, remarked that the death of Christ should have ended the Christian problem, but that it “broke out again” and spread out from Judea to Rome (see chapter six). All three versions of Josephus’s passage (Greek, Arabic, Meier’s reconstruction) include Josephus’s remark that Jesus’ followers continued after his death. But only two versions posit a reason for this exception to the rule; namely, that Jesus’ followers believed he did not remain dead, but appeared to them alive after three days.

In short, Josephus’s testimony not only provides direct evidence of certain facts about Jesus (character, miracles, crucifixion, the claim of his resurrection), but, in at least two of three versions, it points to the reason for the exceptional longevity of his movement.

<sup>53</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 595.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 656.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. 590.

<sup>56</sup> John Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus: The Roots of the Problem and the Person* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 1:60.

<sup>57</sup> *Antiquities*, 271–272.

[58](#) Ibid., 273–276.

[59](#) Ibid., 17, 278–284.

[60](#) *Jewish War*, 2, 259–262; *Antiquities*, 20, 169–171; Acts 21:38. Their followers were eventually extinguished in the First Jewish Revolt.

[61](#) *Antiquities*, 18, 85–87.

[62](#) Ibid., 20, 188.

[63](#) *Jewish War*, 2, 433–450.

[64](#) Ibid., 2–6.

[65](#) Ibid., 7, 26–32.

[66](#) Ibid., 7, 437–441.

[67](#) Theudas is mentioned in *Antiquities*, 20, 5, 1. He was a magician who claimed to be a prophet. He also made a pseudo-messianic claim that he would part the Jordan River and cross it with his followers, much as Moses did during the exodus from Egypt. Theudas was arrested and beheaded, and his followers dispersed. Judas the Galilean is mentioned several times in the *Antiquities*, most notably in *Antiquities*, 20, 5, 2. Judas's sons, James and Simon, were crucified.

## Rabbinical Sources: the Mishnah and Talmud

Just prior to the Second Jewish Revolt (A.D. 132–135), the oral tradition of the Pharisees was set down in writing for the first time in history. The enterprise took place under the auspices of Rabbi Akiba ben Joseph (ca. A.D. 50–135) and was finalized by Judah the Prince (ca. A.D. 135–217). This layer of tradition is known as the *Mishnah*. There are also various comments and commentaries made on the Mishnah, called the *Gemara*. The combination of the Mishnah and the Gemara make up the Jerusalem Talmud and the Babylonian Talmud.

It's important to remember that rabbinical literature, although it contains much historical information, wasn't written to teach history. Its purpose is to instruct. For this reason, rabbinical material tolerates inconsistencies and even outright contradictions as long as the intended message is conveyed. Since our approach in this book focuses on the message conveyed along with its underlying assumptions and implications, rabbinical literature is well suited for our inquiry.

### JESUS' CRUCIFIXION AND MIRACLES

#### TESTIMONY

On the eve of the Passover, Yeshu was hanged. For forty days before the execution took place, a herald went forth and cried, "He is going forth to be stoned because he has practiced sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy. Anyone who can say anything in his favor, let him come forward and plead on his behalf." But since nothing was brought forward in his favor, he was hanged on the eve of the Passover!<sup>68</sup>

This tradition from the Babylonian Talmud comes from the Tannaitic period (A.D. 70–200), which places it within our period of study.

*Sanhedrin* 43a has points of continuity and discontinuity with the Gospels, especially the Gospel of John. For example, Jesus was "hung [on a tree]" on the eve of Passover.<sup>69</sup> This is consistent with the Gospel of John (John 13:1; 18:28; 19:14). *Sanhedrin* also mentions stoning, which differs from the Gospels. John records several instances where the Jewish leaders threatened Jesus with stoning (John 8:58–59; 10:31–33, 39; 11:8), but all of

these took place well before Good Friday. It should also be noted that *Sanhedrin*'s reference to stoning places it at odds not only with Christian sources, but with itself. *Sanhedrin* 43a begins and ends by stating that Yeshu [the Nazarene] was "hanged" on Passover eve. The crier's message about stoning contradicts these assertions.

#### HOSTILE WITNESS

In terms of direct evidence, *Sanhedrin* 43a confirms that Jesus was a real person, that he performed miraculous feats, and that he was executed at a specific time (Passover eve) and by a specific method ("hung"/crucified). The author of this text clearly assumed that he was commenting on actual events and not, as the mythicists claim, an amalgamation of quasi-pagan folklore.

The most striking feature of *Sanhedrin* 43a is that it confirms, albeit in a prejudicial way, that Jesus worked miracles. According to the text, "he [Jesus] has practiced sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy." Like the hostile witnesses in the Gospels, *Sanhedrin* doesn't deny that Jesus worked miracles. What is disputed is whether these deeds demonstrate Jesus' claim to be the Messiah and Son of God. The Pharisees in the Gospels charged Jesus with driving out demons by the power of the prince of demons (Matt. 9:34; 12:24; Mark 3:22; and Luke 11:15). *Sanhedrin* 43a does something similar when it assigns the source of his miraculous power to sorcery. Jesus' followers would also suffer the same calumny. (Matt. 10:25; also see chapter six.)

### THE DEUTEROCANON IS SCRIPTURE

#### TESTIMONY

The Gospels and heretical books do not defile the hands. The books of Ben Sira and all other books written from then on do not defile the hands.<sup>[70](#)</sup>

This passage is attributed to Rabbi Akiba ben Joseph and speaks to the boundaries of Sacred Scripture. Sacred writings are said to defile the hands since they require ritual hand washing after their use. Profane (non-sacred) writings do not defile the hands and could be read without the ritual hand washing. Akiba declares that the "Gospels and heretical books" (the books of the New Testament) do not defile the hands (that is, they are not sacred).

He also says that the book of Sirach (the earliest of the deuterocanonical Old Testament books) and all books written afterward (the rest of the Deuterocanon) are not sacred as well. *Tosefta Yadayim* 2:13, therefore, excludes the New Testament and the Deuterocanon from the Rabbinic Bible.

#### HOSTILE WITNESS

What made Akiba associate the Deuterocanon with the New Testament regarding their potential sacredness? There must have been a sizable number of Jewish Christians living at that time (ca. A.D. 132) who accepted the Gospels and the Deuterocanon as Scripture. Otherwise, there would be no need for this decision.<sup>[71](#)</sup>

Christians weren't the only first-century Jews who regarded the Deuterocanon as Sacred Scripture. The chief priests, scribes, and elders in the New Testament used Wisdom 2:18 as a sacred text at the Crucifixion (see chapter four). Both these testimonies speak against the common Protestant notion that the Jews never accepted the Deuterocanon as Scripture in its fullest sense.<sup>[72](#)</sup>

#### CHRISTIAN MIRACLES

##### TESTIMONY

These are they who have no share in the world to come: who say there is no resurrection of the dead; that the Law is not from heaven; and the Epicureans. R. Akiba adds: He who reads the external books; and he who whispers over a wound, saying: "All the sickness which I brought on Egypt I will not bring upon thee," etc. (Exod. 15:26).<sup>[73](#)</sup>

*Tosefta Sanhedrin* XII, 1–7 excludes from the next life those who deny the resurrection of the body and the inspiration of the Torah. Rabbi Akiba adds two items to this list of disqualifications from the afterlife: reading the "external books" (i.e., books that were excluded from the Rabbinic Bible) and, oddly enough, whispering Exodus 15:26 over a wound. The prohibition from reading the "external books" seems pretty straightforward; in fact, *Tosefta Yadayim* 2:13, quoted above, shows that Akiba would have included Christian Scripture among the "external books." But what about the prohibition against whispering a verse over a wound?



Rabbinical literature prohibits anyone from attempting to “heal one’s self with the words of Torah.”<sup>74</sup> But why single out this verse and include with it a prohibition from reading the “external books”? Exodus 15:26 doesn’t seem to contain anything offensive. It reads, “If you really listen to the voice of the LORD, your God . . . and do what is right in his eyes: if you heed his commandments and keep all his precepts, I will not afflict you with any of the diseases with which I afflicted the Egyptians; for I, the LORD, am your healer.” Why single out this verse?

An answer may be found in the last three Hebrew words translated, “I the LORD am your healer.”<sup>75</sup> Hebrew, like many other ancient languages, assigns numeric values to letters. For example, Latin assigns the value 1 to I, 5 to V, 10 to X, and so on. Letters can be combined in different ways to give different values. For example, the number eleven would be XI where X stands for 10 and I stands for 1. Ten (X) plus 1 (I) equals 11 (XI). What this means is that words can have numeric values, even if the author never intended to give them a number. The Jews understood this phenomenon and had different ways of calculating their values. Why is this important? The numerical value of the last three words in Exodus 15:26 comes to 391.<sup>76</sup> It just so happens that 391 is also the numerical value for the name Jesus (Hebrew: *Yeshua*). Since Christians performed healings and exorcisms by invoking Jesus’ name, could it be that Christians used this verse as a cryptic way to invoke the name of Jesus in order to heal a wound? All the pieces to this puzzle seem to fit except one: Why not just pronounce “Yeshua” over the wound? Why use such a cryptic method?

Christian sources tell us that signs and wonders accompanied the preaching of the gospel, which led to waves of conversions to Christianity. These conversions weren’t a problem only for paganism, but for Judaism as well (Acts 3:6–7; 4:4, 10, 18; 19:13–17). The New Testament speaks of efforts that were made to suppress the name of Jesus (Acts 4:17–19; 9:14). *Sanhedrin* 12:1–7 suggests that measures were taken to prevent Christians from healing Jews by using his name. Invoking Exodus 15:26 may have been a way Christians sidestepped these counter-measures, at least for a time. Eventually, it was discovered and Akiba suppressed this practice as well.



#### TESTIMONY

The grandson [of R. Jehoshua ben Levi] had something stuck in his throat. There came a man and whispered to him in the name of Jeshu Pandera, and he recovered. When he [the doctor] came out, he [R. Jehoshua] said to him, “What didst thou whisper to him?” He said to him, “A certain word.” He said, “It had been better for him that he had died rather than thus.” And it happened thus to him, as it were an error that proceedeth from the ruler (Eccles. 10:5).<sup>77</sup>

Rabbi Jehoshua ben Levi lived in the third Christian century. The healer is not named, but he is apparently a Christian since he whispered the name Jeshu Pandera to cure an affliction. Jeshu Pandera is one of several names given to Jesus in rabbinical literature.<sup>78</sup> Rabbi Jehoshua ben Levi thought it better that his grandson should die than to be healed by this name. The quote from Ecclesiastes 10:5, “error that proceedeth from the ruler” seems to mean that once a deplorable evil has been committed it cannot be taken back.<sup>79</sup> Therefore, the grandson’s healing in the name of Jesus has occurred, and the damage cannot be undone. The point of the lesson is obvious: it is better to die than to be healed in the name of Jesus.

#### HOSTILE WITNESS

Our hostile witnesses testify to a few facts. First, Christian healings really did occur among the Jews. Second, Christians healed simply by pronouncing the name of Jesus over a wound. In this case, a choking victim was healed by the sacred name. Unlike with other hostile witnesses, there is no attempt here to interpret how the healing occurred (through magic, sorcery, etc.); it is treated as a brute fact. Third, the very existence of this lesson shows that Christian healings must have been fairly common; otherwise there would be no need to exhort the Jews to resist Christian healers even at the cost of their lives. Such resistance serves to underscore how great of a threat Christian healings in the name of Jesus were perceived to be by the Jewish leaders at the time.

#### MIRACULOUS HEALING

#### TESTIMONY

People are not to sell anything to [Gentiles] or buy anything from them . . . and they do not seek assistance from them, either financial or medical assistance. There was the case of R. Eleazar b. Damah, who

was bitten by a snake. Jacob of Kefar Sama came to heal him in the name of Jesus son of Pantera. R. Ishmael did not allow him to accept the healing. They said to him, “You are not permitted to accept healing from him, Ben Dama.” He said to him, “I shall bring you proof in the form of a verse of Scripture from the Torah that he may indeed heal me.” But he did not have a chance to bring the proof before he dropped dead. Said R. Ishmael, “Happy are you, Ben Dama, for your body is pure and your soul has not gone forth in purity, [Tosefta: you have expired in peace] but you did not break down the hedge erected by sages. For whoever breaks down the hedge erected by sages eventually suffers punishment, as it is said, “He who breaks down a hedge is bitten by a snake” (Eccles. 10:8).[80](#)

It is difficult to pinpoint an exact date when this occurred. Jacob of Kefar Sama was a contemporary of Ishmael, who lived approximately two generations after the time of Jesus. The Ben Dama incident is recounted as part of a general prohibition against accepting assistance from Gentiles, especially, it seems, from Christians. The story is very similar to the healing of R. Jehoshua ben Levi’s grandson; only in this instance, the Christian was successfully prevented from healing Ben Dama.

#### HOSTILE WITNESS

The warning in this passage is a bit stronger than in the passage mentioned previously since Eleazar ben Damah died from his affliction. But the basic lesson is the same: it is more blessed to die obeying the prohibition of the rabbis than to be healed in the name of Jesus. What’s astounding about this passage is that the author assumes that Ben Dama would have been healed had Jacob invoked Jesus’ name! This is a significant admission, since it implies that such healings occurred frequently enough to warrant a specific prohibition.

Rabbi Ishmael’s concluding words are also important: “For you expired in peace, but you did not break down the hedge erected by the sages.” The “hedge erected by the sages” refers to rabbinical legislation that prohibits any action that comes close to breaking the Law. This indicates that by the time of Rabbi Ishmael official action had already been put into place to prevent Christian healings. Why erect this “hedge” if there wasn’t a pressing need?

## CONCLUSION

The value of Jewish hostile testimony cannot be overstated. The Jews undoubtedly had no desire to affirm anything positive about Jesus or Christianity. Yet Jewish sources indirectly confirm several key facts about Jesus' life and death—namely, that he worked miracles (Josephus, *Sanhedrin*) and was crucified (Josephus, *Sanhedrin*) under Pontius Pilate (Josephus) on Passover eve (*Sanhedrin*). All the Jewish hostile witnesses held Jesus to have been a real person, and the idea that he was a quasi-fictional amalgam of pagan mythical figures was foreign to their thought.

Probably the most interesting thing about these hostile testimonies is their affirmation of Christian miracles. Our earliest extra-biblical Jewish witness, Josephus, affirms that Jesus was a wise man who worked “startling deeds.” Rabbinical literature echoes Jesus' New Testament enemies, conceding that he worked wondrous deeds, but disputing the source of them. In the New Testament, Jesus' enemies accused him of performing miracles by the power of the devil (the prince of demons). Rabbinical literature identified the source of his power as magic or sorcery. As we will see in the next part, the pagan philosophers Celsus and Porphyry made the same charge.

The miraculous character of Christianity and the waves of converts it inspired were seen as threats by Jewish and pagan leaders alike. As we saw with Tacitus and Pliny, pagan rulers resorted to suppression and persecution to put down the Christian movement. The rabbinical leadership relied on what *Tosefta-Tractate Hullin* 2:22–4 called a “hedge erected by sages,” a program of resistance to Christian healings. Together, the pagan and Jewish reactions to Christian miracles show that such miracles really did take place.

## FURTHER READING

- Habermas, Gary R. *Ancient Evidence for the Life of Jesus: Historical Records of His Death and Resurrection*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988.
- Michuta, Gary. *The Case for the Deuterocanon: Evidence and Arguments*. Livonia: Nikaria Press, 2015.
- Shafer, Peter. *Jesus in the Talmud*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009.

Van Voorst, Robert. *Jesus Outside the New Testament: An Introduction to the Ancient Evidence*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000.

[68](#) Jacob Neusner, ed., *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2011). B. *Sanhedrin* 6:1h, II.1.

[69](#) Luke speaks of Jesus being “hung on a tree” (Acts 5:30; 10:39), and Paul in Galatians 3:13 applies the idea in Deuteronomy 21:23 of a body being hung on a tree.

[70](#) *Tosefta Yadayim*, 2:13 as quoted in Sid Leiman, *The Canonization of Hebrew Scripture* (Connecticut: Archon, 1991), 109.

[71](#) For more details see Gary Michuta’s *The Case for the Deuterocanon: Evidence and Arguments*.

[72](#) For a history of the Deuterocanon within Protestantism, see Gary Michuta’s *Why Catholic Bibles are Bigger: The Untold Story of the Lost Books of the Protestant Bible* (Pinckney, Michigan: Grotto Press, 2007).

[73](#) *Tractate Sanhedrin: Mishnah and Tosefta*, trans. Herbert Danby (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1919), 120.

[74](#) Babylonian Talmud, *Shevuot* 15b, “R. Joshua b. Levi says, ‘It is forbidden to heal oneself through reciting words of Torah.’”

[75](#) In Hebrew רפאך יהיה אג

[76](#) This is the sum total of all the letters with values plus three for the three words used. See Louis Ginzberg’s article, “Some Observations on the Attitude of the Synagogue Towards the Apocalyptic-Eschatological Writings,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 41 (1922): 122.

[77](#) As quoted in Robert Herford’s *Christianity in the Talmud and Mishnah* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1903), 108.

[78](#) This particular name is common, and it is part of an anti-Christian polemic that claims that Jesus was the illegitimate son of a Roman soldier named Pandera or Pantera.

[79](#) Herford, *Christianity in the Talmud and Mishnah*, 109.

[80](#) Neusner, ed., *The Babylonian Talmud. Tosefta-tractate Hullin* 2:22–4.

## Part IV

# Later Pagan and Heretical Writers

The third and fourth Christian centuries are known as the “Golden Age of the Early Church Fathers.” Such luminaries as Augustine, Jerome, Athanasius, and Ambrose flourished during this period. In some ways, the same period was also a “Golden Age” of hostile witnesses, since it is when some of the most notorious opponents of the Faith such as Celsus the Platonist, Porphyry of Tyre, and Julian the Apostate made their mark in Church history. Unlike our earlier pagan witnesses, who preferred to say as little as possible about the Christian “superstition,” these writers set their task to undermine Christianity with every stroke of their pen. Even these formidable enemies, however, still make some surprising admissions that are especially valuable today.

In addition to those named above, this part also includes several lesser-known writers and material, such as a quotation from the first-century wonder-worker Apollonius of Tyana, selections from the so-called Greek Magical Papyri, two examples of anti-Christian graffiti, and an account of the bizarre failure of one of the most audacious attempts to discredit Christianity in history.

## Celsus the Platonist (fl. ca. 175–180) Philosopher and Polemicist

Celsus was a pagan philosopher who wrote an anti-Christian work called *The True Word* or *The True Discourse*. It was written sometime around A.D. 177. The original is lost, but it survives almost in its entirety in Origen's refutation, *Against Celsus*. The authenticity and accuracy of Origen's quotations are almost universally accepted. Origen quotes whole sections of Celsus's work (often repeating them), and much of Origen's defense rests on exposing Celsus's inaccuracies.

Celsus's knowledge of Judaism and Christianity is as broad as it is inaccurate. He seems to have had contact with Jews, Christians, and Gnostics, although he occasionally confused the latter two. Celsus quotes extensively from "a Jew" who argued against Christianity. There is a dispute as to whether his Jewish apologist was a real person or a rhetorical device. Origen believed the latter since the arguments he gives sometimes undermine Judaism as well as Christianity.

### AUTHENTICITY OF MIRACLES

#### TESTIMONY

After this, through the influence of some motive which is unknown to me, Celsus asserts that it is by the names of certain demons, and by the use of incantations, that the Christians appear to be possessed of (miraculous) power; hinting, I suppose, at the practices of those who expel evil spirits by incantations. . . . And he next proceeds to bring a charge against the Savior himself, alleging that it was by means of sorcery that he was able to accomplish the wonders which he performed.<sup>81</sup>

The quotation above comes from Origen, not Celsus. It is, however, a good starting point since it outlines Celsus's main attack against Christ's and his followers' miracles—namely, that miracles are achieved through the mediation of evil spirits commanded by incantations. Celsus makes this charge numerous times and in different ways throughout his work.

#### HOSTILE WITNESS

Like our previous hostile witnesses, Celsus never denies that Jesus and his followers worked miracles; he just disputes the source of these miracles. As Origen notes, Celsus believed that Christ and his disciples worked miracles through sorcery using incantations that called upon the names of various demons.

Origen successfully refutes this charge by noting that “even if it be impossible to show by what power Jesus wrought these miracles, it is clear that Christians employ no spells or incantations, but the simple name of Jesus, and certain other words in which they repose faith, according to holy Scripture.”<sup>82</sup> Origen’s claim is supported by Christian sources as well as the Jewish hostile witnesses in the last part. Healings occur by whispering Jesus’ name. Nothing else is mentioned.

Likewise, if one compares Jesus’ miracles recorded in the Gospels with the nonsensical incantations recorded in the Greek Magical Papyri (ancient pagan spell books; see chapter eighteen), Origen’s claim rings true. Neither Jesus nor his followers recited incantations. Jesus’ miracles generally came by way of a command, such as “Quiet! Come out of him!” (Mark 1:25). “Be made clean!” (Mark 1:41). “Young man, I tell you, arise” (Luke 7:14). Several other examples can be added.<sup>83</sup> Even the few times Jesus says something that to our ears may sound magical, like “Talitha koum” (Mark 5:41) and “Ephphatha!” (Mark 7:34), they are nothing more than first-person commands in Aramaic, Jesus’ native language.<sup>84</sup> The Magical Papyri’s incantations include commands, but they also attempt to conjure gods or threaten them to do the magician’s bidding. Jesus never attempts anything like this. Moreover, pagan incantations also contain a fair amount of gibberish, which is entirely absent in the Gospels.

## JESUS IS A REAL HISTORIC PERSON

### TESTIMONY

And since, in imitation of a rhetorician training a pupil, he introduces a Jew . . . disputing with Jesus, and confuting him, as he thinks, on many points; and in the first place, he accuses him of having “invented his birth from a virgin,” and upbraids him with being “born in a certain Jewish village, of a poor woman of the country, who gained her subsistence by spinning, and who was turned out of doors by her husband, a carpenter by trade, because she was convicted of adultery; that after being driven away by her husband, and wandering about for a time, she disgracefully gave birth to Jesus, an illegitimate child, who having hired himself out as a servant in Egypt on account of his poverty, and having there acquired some miraculous powers, on which

the Egyptians greatly pride themselves, returned to his own country, highly elated on account of them, and by means of these proclaimed himself a God.”[85](#)

Celsus’s tale about Jesus’ mother is a twisted rendition of certain aspects of Matthew’s Gospel. He exploits Joseph’s thoughts about divorcing Mary so as to cast aspersions on Christ’s mother (Matt. 1:19). He also seems to use the Holy Family’s flight into Egypt (Matt. 2:13–15) as an opportunity for Jesus to learn magic, though Celsus asserts that Jesus visited Egypt as an adult.

#### HOSTILE WITNESS

If anything is clear, it is that Celsus’s Jewish antagonist wasn’t a mythicist when it came to the Gospels. For him, Jesus was a real historic person, born of a woman, who grew up and learned magic from the Egyptians.

#### RESURRECTION CONCEDED

#### TESTIMONY

But after this, Celsus, having a suspicion that the great works performed by Jesus, of which we have named a few out of a great number, would be brought forward to view, affects to grant that those statements may be true which are made regarding his cures, or his resurrection, or the feeding of a multitude with a few loaves, from which many fragments remained over, or those other stories which Celsus thinks the disciples have recorded as of a marvellous nature; and he adds: “Well, let us believe that these were actually wrought by you.” But then he immediately compares them to the tricks of jugglers, who profess to do more wonderful things, and to the feats performed by those who have been taught by Egyptians, who in the middle of the marketplace, in return for a few obols, will impart the knowledge of their most venerated arts, and will expel demons from men, and dispel diseases, and invoke the souls of heroes, and exhibit expensive banquets, and tables, and dishes, and dainties having no real existence, and who will put in motion, as if alive, what are not really living animals, but which have only the appearance of life. And he asks, “Since, then, these persons can perform such feats, shall we of necessity conclude that they are ‘sons of God,’ or must we admit that



they are the proceedings of wicked men under the influence of an evil spirit?"<sup>86</sup>

Celsus returns to his charge that the miracles of Jesus, even his resurrection, were the product of magic that he learned in Egypt. Celsus failed to recognize that these miracles took place within a Jewish prophetic context. They weren't astounding feats, like the jugglers in Egypt, but they were signs that established Jesus' identity as the Messiah. Therefore, Celsus misses the point entirely.

#### HOSTILE WITNESS

Celsus concedes too much when he includes Christ's resurrection from the dead as a work of magic. A magician may produce an illusion, but a dead magician can't do anything. He's dead! The only way to pull off this feat is to remain alive and only appear to be dead (the aforementioned Swoon Theory; see chapter five). Indeed, it is difficult to imagine any magician, no matter how zealous, who would be willing to be tortured and crucified just to pull off a stunt. Moreover, the facts surrounding Christ's crucifixion argue against this theory.<sup>87</sup> If magic cannot account for Christ's resurrection, what does?

#### GOSPELS NOT FABRICATED FOR ACCEPTANCE

#### TESTIMONY

What God that appeared among men is received with incredulity, and that, too, when appearing to those who expect him? Or why, pray, is he not recognized by those who have been long looking for him?<sup>88</sup>

#### HOSTILE WITNESS

Celsus's Jewish interlocutor recognizes something that eludes many critics today: the gospel wasn't tailored for popular consumption. If one were to pull off a hoax by fabricating a story, it stands to reason that one would fashion the story to produce the greatest possible chance of success. As our hostile witness points out, the gospel did just the opposite. Some of Jesus' prophetic fulfillments weren't fully anticipated by the Jews. Political hopes emphasized certain prophecies (like those that point to the Messiah as the conquering king) at the expense of other prophecies (such as the Suffering Servant). They certainly didn't expect God himself to become incarnate, be crucified, die, and rise from the dead on the third day. The biblical data was there, but it wasn't at all clear beforehand.

The gospel wasn't tailored for pagan acceptance either. Pagans scoffed at the thought that a god would become flesh, since the flesh was the seat of suffering and death. For them, the soul wished to escape the prison of the body, not be imprisoned within it. The bodily resurrection, therefore, was also absurd. To make matters worse, Christ died by crucifixion, the most deplorable way to be executed. Paul recognized this obstacle when he wrote that the cross of Christ was "a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (1 Cor. 1:23). Add to this list internal difficulties in the texts, embarrassing *faux pas* by those closest to Jesus and future leaders in the Church, Christ's opposition by his own people, and you have a gospel that, if fabricated, was fabricated for failure. How then did they succeed?

If the Gospels are honest and authentic accounts of Jesus' life then they are merely exhibiting all the complexities and difficulties that one would expect from eyewitness accounts.<sup>89</sup> Christians knew the Gospels were genuine. Paul knew it, too. Even Celsus knew it, and attempted to turn what would be a powerful argument *for* the authenticity of the Gospels into an argument against their authenticity.

<sup>81</sup> Origen, *Against Celsus*, 1, 6. ANF 4:370–371.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid. ANF 4:372.

<sup>83</sup> Cf. Matthew 8:28–34; 9:18–26, 27–31; 12:10–13; 21:18–22; Mark 7:31–37; Luke 13:10–17; 17:11–19; John 5:1–9; 11:1–46. Jesus also healed without having any contact with the sick person (Matt. 8:5–13; 15:22–28; John 4:46–53).

<sup>84</sup> Mark 5:41—"Little girl, I say to you, arise"; and Mark 7:34—"be opened."

<sup>85</sup> *Against Celsus*, 1, 28. ANF 4:407.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 1, 68. ANF 4:427.

<sup>87</sup> In light of the wounds that Jesus sustained during his passion and crucifixion, that he was killed by experienced, well-trained executioners, that he was wrapped from head to toe in linen and sealed in a tomb by a large rock, and that the tomb's entrance was guarded, the idea that he could have survived and escaped the tomb is preposterous.

<sup>88</sup> *Against Celsus*, 2, 75. ANF 4:461–462.

<sup>89</sup> See J. Warner Wallace's *Cold-Case Christianity: A Homicide Detective Investigates the Claims of the Gospels* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2013).

## Lucian of Samosata (ca. A.D. 125–180) Rhetorician and Satirist

Little is known about Lucian of Samosata. He was a Syrian rhetorician who wrote several works that are still available today. He comments on Christianity in his satirical work *Death of Peregrinus*. Peregrinus Proteus (A.D. 95–165) was a pagan who converted to Christianity while living in Palestine. He seems to have gained some position of authority within the local church, but he lost his faith and was excommunicated. He became a Cynic philosopher and committed suicide by immolating himself at the Olympic Games in A.D. 165. Tertullian, Tatian, and Athenagoras mention him in their writings. Lucian, who was present at the Games when Peregrinus killed himself, heard one of Peregrinus's followers praising him, so Lucian decided to author a work showing the absurdity of Peregrinus's life. In this work, Lucian provides a short description of Christianity in his day.

### JESUS IS WORSHIPPED AS GOD, CHRISTIAN CHARITY

#### TESTIMONY

The Christians, you know, worship a man to this day—the distinguished personage who introduced their novel rites, and was crucified on that account. . . . You see, these misguided creatures start with the general conviction that they are immortal for all time, which explains their contempt of death and voluntary self-devotion which are so common among them; and then it was impressed on them by their original lawgiver that they are all brothers, from the moment that they are converted, and deny the gods of Greece, and worship the crucified sage, and live after his laws. All this they take quite on faith, with the result that they despise all worldly goods alike, regarding them merely as common property.<sup>90</sup>

In this short passage, Lucian twice mentions that Christians worship Jesus and twice mentions that he was crucified. The combination is undoubtedly done for effect, since the idea of worshipping a crucified sage would sound absurd to pagan ears. Lucian believed that Jesus was crucified

because he “introduced novel rites,” which is odd but in a sense correct. Jesus instituted a New Covenant and transformed the Old Testament sacraments into the sacraments of the New Covenant (e.g., circumcision into baptism, Passover into the Eucharist). What Lucian missed, however, was that it wasn’t the introduction of “novel rites” *per se* that caused Jesus’ crucifixion, but his claim to have the authority to introduce a new Law (i.e., that he was the Messiah and Son of God).

#### HOSTILE WITNESS

Lucian states that Christians worshipped their “crucified sage.” This description attests that the early Christians understood Jesus to be God. Lucian also mentions the “novel rites” instituted by Christ the lawgiver. Fundamentalist Protestants and atheists sometimes claim that the sacraments were the product of Christian-pagan syncretism. In other words, they are Christianized versions of pagan rites. Lucian’s description, however, speaks against such a notion. The fact that Lucian, a pagan, styles the Christian rites as novel and says that Jesus instituted them strongly argues against such a connection. If the sacraments were revamped ceremonies of the mystery cults, Lucian missed a great opportunity to lampoon Christians on this point, but he didn’t.

Lucian also zeros in on an aspect of Christianity that he found strange and worthy of ridicule, but which to us today is as natural as the air we breathe: Christian charity. The satirist sneers at the idea that Christians believe that “they are all brothers” and that they exhibit a “voluntary self-devotion which are so common among them.” By believing in the world to come, Lucian notes, Christians show a detachment from all worldly goods and regard such goods as common property. The very fact that Lucian singles these things out says a lot about the ancient pre-Christian world. Christian brotherhood and charity was as foreign to the ancient pagan mind as quantum physics.

Pagans generally despised the poor: “Poverty was considered a state of inferiority, debasement, and dishonor. . . . Pity and kindness toward the unfortunate and the poor were practically unknown in the pagan world. There were no alms-houses, no shelters, no hospitals for the many ills of humanity.”<sup>91</sup> The ancient world probably looked a lot like what we find in India today: dead bodies lie on the streets while people casually step over

them; children climb into insect-infested bins searching for bits of rotten food to take home to their parents; giving food to the poor is discouraged because it is seen as encouraging pauperism. People tend to romanticize the ancient world as a paradise of libertine morality and polished marble columns, but it wasn't. It was a dirty, harsh, and unforgiving world made up of users and the used.

Lucian's bewilderment at the sight of Christian love and charity illustrates how Christ brought something into the world that wasn't there: the sacredness of all human life, including the poor. To understand why this is essential to the Christian worldview we need to look at Christian sources. According to Christian revelation, God came into our world and took the lowest place. He was born in a manger and lived a humble life. By doing so, he dignified poverty and forged the Christian idea that all believers—poor and rich, great and lowly—are brothers and sisters, members of Christ's Body, the Church. Whatever is done for the least ones is done for Christ (Matt. 25:32–46). This outpouring of love for the poor also brought about what is called “affective poverty,” a Christian detachment from worldly wealth and possessions. Lucian also recognizes this affective poverty and adds it to the list of strange Christian practices.

The pagan form of charity mimicked Christian charity only accidentally. Occasionally, pagans might give food or money to the poor to show their benevolence, or they may have detached themselves from worldly goods to make a philosophical point.<sup>92</sup> These instances, however, were mere curiosities. Lucian's satire shows how foreign Christian charity was to the pagan worldview. The fact that we today don't pay much attention to such charity shows how thoroughly Christianity has revolutionized Western thought. Even today, nonbelievers think that caring for the poor and less fortunate is just part of being human, and that Christian charity will continue without its Christian underpinning. Lucian's reaction to it shows otherwise.

<sup>90</sup> Lucian, “The Death of Peregrine,” in *The Works of Lucian of Samosata*, trans. H.W. Fowler and F.G. Fowler (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1949), 4:83.

<sup>91</sup> Luigi Civardi, *How Christ Changed the World: Social Principles of the Catholic Church* (Rockford: TAN Books, 1961), 20.

<sup>92</sup> For example, Diogenes gave up his home to live in a barrel in the countryside.

## Porphyry of Tyre (A.D. 234–305) Philosopher and Polemicist

Porphyry was a neo-platonic philosopher who wrote widely on a number of issues. He is best known in Christian circles for his fifteen-volume anti-Christian work, *Against the Christians*, which was among the anti-Christian books Emperor Theodosius II ordered to be burned in A.D. 435 and 448. Only fragments of it have survived. Porphyry's main attack was on New Testament difficulties, which broke little new ground and provides little for our purposes here. However, Porphyry's writings are not devoid of value in this respect. He did make several significant admissions in a fragment of a lost work titled *The Philosophy of Oracles*, which was preserved by Augustine.

### AUTHENTICITY OF MIRACLES

#### TESTIMONY

Paul conquered the whole world, from the ocean to the Red Sea. Let some say, "He did it all for money"; for this Porphyry says, "(They were) poor and country-dwelling men, seeing that they used to have nothing; certain wonders were worked with magical arts. Not that it is unusual however to do wonders; for the magicians in Egypt also did wonders against Moses, Apollonius also did them, Apuleius also did them, and any number have done wonders." I concede, Porphyry, that they did wonders by magical arts, "so that they might receive riches from rich and impressionable women, whom they had led astray." For you say this—(yet) why were they killed? Why were they crucified?<sup>93</sup>

St. Jerome (347–420) preserves this fragment from Porphyry's *Against the Christians*. Porphyry launches a three-pronged attack. First, he asserts that the apostles were "poor and country-dwelling men" in need of money, so they worked miracles "that they might receive riches from the rich and impressionable women." Second, he asserts that Christian miracles were the product of the magical arts. Third, he states that these miracles were no different than those of other ancient wonder-workers (e.g., the Egyptian

magicians that opposed Moses, Apollonius of Tyana [A.D. 15–100] and Apuleius [A.D. 125–180]).

#### HOSTILE WITNESS

Like the hostile witnesses who preceded him, Porphyry concedes the existence of Christian miracles, but assigns the source of their power to magic. His rationale hardly makes sense, as Jerome explains. If the apostles were performing miracles just to make money, why did they accept crucifixion? Why not avoid death and admit what they were doing? Porphyry's thesis not only defies common sense, but it also contradicts what is found in Christian and hostile sources. For example, how could the apostles be so greedy for wealth and at the same time practice the affective poverty recognized by Lucian of Samasota? (See chapter fourteen.)

Porphyry also makes the same error as Celsus when he sees miracles simply as astonishing acts and not as signs made within a Jewish context. As a result, he sees no difference between Christian miracles and the wonders performed by the Egyptian magicians, Apollonius, and Apuleius. Since none of them performed signs (in the Jewish-Christian context of that word), they are categorically different.

#### JESUS WORSHIPPED AS GOD, HONORED BY THE GODS

#### TESTIMONY

[Augustine recounts the following:] For in his [Porphyry's] book called *Ek Logion Philosophias*, in which he collects and comments upon the responses which he pretends were uttered by the gods concerning divine things, he says—I give his own words as they have been translated from the Greek: “To one who inquired what god he should propitiate in order to recall his wife from Christianity, Apollo replied in the following verses.” Then the following words are given as those of Apollo: “You will probably find it easier to write lasting characters on the water, or lightly fly like a bird through the air, than to restore right feeling in your impious wife once she has polluted herself. Let her remain as she pleases in her foolish deception, and sing false laments to her dead God, who was condemned by right-minded judges, and perished ignominiously by a violent death.”

Then after these verses of Apollo (which we have given in a Latin version that does not preserve the metrical form), he goes on to say:



“In these verses Apollo exposed the incurable corruption of the Christians, saying that the Jews, rather than the Christians, recognized God.” Apollo, he says, when asked whether word, i.e., reason, or law is the better thing, replied in the following verses. Then he gives the verses of Apollo, from which I select the following as sufficient: “God, the Generator, and the King prior to all things, before whom heaven and earth, and the sea, and the hidden places of hell tremble, and the deities themselves are afraid, for their law is the Father whom the holy Hebrews honor.” In this oracle of his god Apollo, Porphyry avowed that the God of the Hebrews is so great that the deities themselves are afraid before him. I am surprised, therefore, that when God said, “He that sacrifices to other gods shall be utterly destroyed,” Porphyry himself was not afraid lest he should be destroyed for sacrificing to other gods.

This philosopher, however, has also some good to say of Christ, oblivious, as it were, of that contumely of his of which we have just been speaking; or as if his gods spoke evil of Christ only while asleep, and recognized him to be good, and gave him his deserved praise, when they awoke. For, as if he were about to proclaim some marvelous thing passing belief, he says, “What we are going to say will certainly take some by surprise. For the gods have declared that Christ was very pious, and has become immortal, and that they cherish his memory: that the Christians, however, are polluted, contaminated, and involved in error. And many other such things,” he says, “do the gods say against the Christians.”[94](#)

Porphyry is supposedly recounting an oracle that was given to him by the god Apollo. Whether Porphyry contrived this oracle or it was the product of a spiritualistic communication from some demonic entity is unclear.

#### HOSTILE WITNESS

When asked about which god to petition in order to win back a wife who had become Christian, “Apollo” gives a startling response: None. It can’t be done! Whether the oracle was that of Porphyry or some unknown demonic entity, the answer says more than perhaps it was meant to say. Wasn’t there a single “god” who could release a Christian woman from her supposed error? Why was Christianity so invincible? If these words are truly some



sort of oracle by a demonic entity, it attests to Christianity having superior power to its own.

Porphyry also attests to Christians singing hymns to Christ as God, or as Porphyry puts it, “sing false laments to her dead God.” Earlier, Pliny the Younger made a similar observation (see chapter seven). Porphyry’s testimony is relatively late. It is, however, yet another piece of evidence that Christians believed Jesus to be God prior to the Council of Nicaea in 325.

Porphyry’s “Apollo” also proposes something that later enemies of the Church will follow. He affirms Christ, but rejects his Body, the Church. “Apollo” does this by stating that “the gods have declared that Christ was very pious . . . they cherish his memory.” However, the Church is “polluted, contaminated, and involved in error.” The genius of Porphyry’s oracle concerning Christ and his Church is that it proposes a marvelous self-contradiction: to be truly pious toward Christ, one must reject his Body, the Church.

<sup>93</sup> Jerome, *Tract on Psalm 81*, [http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/porphyry\\_against\\_christians\\_02\\_fragments.htm](http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/porphyry_against_christians_02_fragments.htm). Accessed on July 6, 2016.

<sup>94</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, 19, 23. NPNF 3:415.

## Apollonius of Tyana (A.D. 15–100) First-Century Pagan Wonder-Worker

Apollonius of Tyana was a Greek Epicurean philosopher known for his travels and wondrous exploits. He was a contemporary of Christ, although he didn't know about him or about Christianity. Much of the information we have about Apollonius comes from a semi-historical novel written by Philostratus (A.D. 170–250) called *The Life of Apollonius*. Neither Apollonius nor Philostratus's novel appears to be anti-Christian. He is included among our hostile witnesses, however, because pagan polemicists Sossianus Hierocles (ca. 303) and Porphyry (d. 305) appealed to Apollonius's life as a rival to Jesus', using the pagan's wondrous feats as counter-evidence to the uniqueness of Christ. Modern anti-Christians likewise use Apollonius for the same purpose.

### APOLLONIUS ON WHAT CONSTITUTES A TRUE MIRACLE

#### TESTIMONY

One day the king was showing to him the grotto under the Euphrates, and asked him what he thought of so wonderful a thing. Apollonius in answer belittled the wonder of the work, and said: "It would be a real miracle, O king, if you went dry-shod through a river as deep as this and as unfordable."<sup>95</sup>

While visiting Babylon, a king gives Apollonius and his companion Damis a tour of his territory. Throughout Philostratus's work, Apollonius exhibits the annoying habit of instructing and correcting everyone he meets. This instance is no different. After seeing the grotto under the Euphrates, Apollonius instructs the king on what would be a "real miracle": walking across an unfordable river dry-shod.

#### HOSTILE WITNESS

It's ironic that the very man anti-Christians have the temerity to compare to Christ as a wonder-worker would define a "real miracle" as someone who "went dry-shod through a river." Apollonius must have surely believed such a feat was impossible, and he never attempted it himself. However, Jesus essentially accomplishes Apollonius's "real miracle" when he walked on

the sea (Matt. 14:25–26; Mark 6:48–49; John 6:19). Indeed, Jesus not only walked on the sea, but he also had Peter do the same thing (Matt. 14:29). Jesus’ “real miracle” suggests that, contrary to the claims of Sossianus Hierocles and Porphyry, Apollonius was inferior to Christ in terms of the wonders he produced.<sup>96</sup>

<sup>95</sup> Philostratus, *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, trans. F.C. Conybeare (Loeb Classical Library, 1912) 1:111–112.

<sup>96</sup> Someone may be tempted to see Jesus traversing the sea as somehow being dependent upon Apollonius’s comment. There is no evidence of dependence. Moreover, the dates of the Gospels and the sources of Philostratus’s *Life of Apollonius* make this highly implausible. The most important difference is, however, that Jesus’ walking on the water was a sign that had meaning within a Jewish-Christian context (cf. Job 9:8; 38:16; Ps. 77:20; Sir. 24:5; Isa. 43:16). Apollonius had no knowledge of such a sign. He was just spit-balling about what would really be astounding. The connection between the two is accidental, yet apologetically important.

## Alexamenos Graffito (2nd Century) Anti-Christian Graffiti

The testimony of this hostile witness is not found in a book, but was scratched into a wall. The Alexamenos graffito was etched into plaster sometime during the second Christian century. It was discovered in 1856 in one of the rooms of the Paedagogium, a building used to train the imperial guards on Rome's Palatine hill. The graffito is a caricature of a small beardless man raising his left hand, apparently in supplication, to a crucified donkey-headed man. Beneath the figure is a crudely made Greek inscription that reads, "Alexamenos worships his God." In the next chamber, another inscription reads, "Alexamenos [is] faithful."

### EARLY CHRISTIANS WORSHIPED THE CRUCIFIED JESUS AS GOD

#### HOSTILE WITNESS

This small graffito tells us a lot about the pagan's view of Christianity, including some aspects of the Faith that are denied today. The Alexamenos graffito shows us that even the pagans understood that Christians worshipped Jesus as God (or according to their polytheistic perspective, "a god"). This echoes that statements to this effect made by Pliny the Younger, Lucian, and Porphyry. Like Lucian, the pagan soldier who etched the graffito mocks Alexamenos for worshipping someone executed on a cross.

The graffito is also the earliest known depiction of the Crucifixion.<sup>[97](#)</sup> It also, curiously enough, contradicts three claims made by the Jehovah's Witnesses. According to them, worship is given to the one true God, Jehovah. However, the graffito states that Alexamenos is worshipping Jesus as his "god." This contradicts two of the Jehovah's Witnesses teachings, namely, that Jesus is not the one true God and that he cannot be worshipped. The Jehovah's Witnesses also teach that Jesus was crucified on a torture stake, not a cross. The Alexamenos graffito shows that it was a cross.<sup>[98](#)</sup>

Another interesting point about the graffito's cross is that it appears to be in the shape, not of a traditional cross, but of a T (or the Greek letter *tau*). The tau-shaped cross may hearken to an early devotional practice also noted by Tertullian:

Premising, therefore, and likewise subjoining the fact that Christ suffered, he foretold that his just ones should suffer equally with him—both the apostles and all the faithful in succession; and he signed them with that very seal of which Ezekiel spake: “The Lord said unto me, ‘Go through the gate, through the midst of Jerusalem, and set the mark Tau upon the foreheads of the men’” (Ezek. 9:4). Now the Greek letter Tau and our own letter T is the very form of the cross, which he predicted would be the sign on our foreheads in the true Catholic Jerusalem.<sup>99</sup>

Elsewhere, Tertullian notes,

In all our travels and movements, in all our coming in and going out, in putting on our shoes, at the bath, at the table, in lighting our candles, in lying down, in sitting down, whatever employment occupies us, we mark our foreheads with the sign of the cross.<sup>100</sup>

With this background in mind, one wonders whether the Alexamenos figure has his hand extended because he is making the sign of the cross while worshipping his crucified Lord.

<sup>97</sup> The early Church Father Tertullian (A.D. 155–240) seems to have encountered a similar graffito, as he recounts in *Apology*, 16, 12–14. ANF 3:31: “But lately a new edition of our God has been given to the world in that great city: it originated with a certain vile man who was wont to hire himself out to cheat the wild beasts, and who exhibited a picture with this inscription: The God of the Christians, born of an ass. He had the ears of an ass, was hoofed in one foot, carried a book, and wore a toga. Both the name and the figure gave us amusement. But our opponents ought straightway to have done homage to this bifomed divinity, for they have acknowledged gods dog-headed and lion-headed, with horn of buck and ram, with goat-like loins, with serpent legs, with wings sprouting from back or foot.”

<sup>98</sup> The Jehovah’s Witnesses believe that Jesus was crucified on a stake with no crossbar (*patibulum*). The Alexamenos graffito shows that the pagans, who had far more knowledge about this form of execution than we do today, understood Jesus to be crucified on a traditional cross.

<sup>99</sup> Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, 3, 22. ANF 3:340.

<sup>100</sup> Tertullian, *De corona*, 3. ANF 3:94–95.

## Greek Magical Papyri (5th Century) Pagan Egyptian Papyrus

In the early 1800s, dozens of Greek papyri containing spells, hymns, and other pagan magical rituals were discovered in Egypt; collectively, they are known as the Greek Magical Papyri (PGM). Below are two texts from these ancient pagan spell books that speak about Jesus.

### JESUS' NAME ADOPTED BY PAGAN EXORCISTS

#### TESTIMONY

Formula to be spoken over his head. Place olive branches before him, and stand behind him and say: “Hail, God of Abraham; hail, God of Isaac; hail, God of Jacob; Jesus Chrestos, the Holy Spirit, the Son of the Father.”[101](#)

“I conjure you by the God of the Hebrews, Jesus.”[102](#)

The PGM texts in question can be dated to sometime in the fourth century. Their author was definitely not Christian. He makes the common pagan mistake of using *Chrestos* (“excellent”) instead of the proper *Christos* (“anointed”). He bungles a Trinitarian formula, which is something no Christian would ever do. He also, later in the same text, addresses the unclean spirit as “unclean demon Satan”—this is not exactly common parlance for the prince of darkness. No Christian author would have allowed these mistakes to remain.[103](#) But the PGM texts are clearly borrowing from Christian sources when they invoke Jesus’ name and allude to the Trinity.

#### HOSTILE WITNESS

This isn’t the first time a non-Christian has used the name of Jesus to perform exorcisms. In the New Testament, the seven sons of Sceva the Jewish high priest invoked the name of Jesus during an exorcism (Acts 19:11–17) (see chapter three). The question is, why did these pagan magicians feel the need to include Jesus’ name (identifying him as a god) in their exorcism rituals? The title of the incantation says it all: “Excellent Rite for Driving Out Demons.” Apparently, it worked very well.

These Greek Magical Papyri found in Egypt make an interesting foil to all the previous hostile witnesses who claimed that Jesus and his followers practiced magic. To the contrary: Christians didn't use Egyptian magic, but later in the fourth and fifth centuries Egyptian magicians were using elements from Christianity. Shouldn't these Egyptian magicians, of all people, have recognized Jesus as one of their own? Not only do they fail to make such a connection, but by invoking Jesus as "the god of the Hebrews" and calling upon him to come to their aid they show that they recognized that his power far exceeded their own.

<sup>101</sup> "Excellent Rite For Driving Out Daimons," PGM 4, 1227.

<sup>102</sup> "A Tested Charm of Pibechis For Those Possessed By Daimons," PGM 4, 3007–3086.

<sup>103</sup> Graham Twelftree, *In the Name of Jesus: Exorcism Among Early Christians* (Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 263–264.

## Flavius Claudius Julianus (Julian the Apostate) (330–363) Roman Emperor

Julian was born to a Christian family. He was the son of Julius Constantius (d. 337), the half-brother of the emperor Constantine. At a young age, Julian narrowly escaped the slaughter of his kinsfolk in Constantinople. He was raised by two men, Mardonius and Nicocles, who were secretly pagan. Julian blamed the slaughter of his family on Christianity and immersed himself in pagan philosophy and magic. The philosopher Maximus of Ephesus foretold that one day Julian would restore paganism to its former glory. After the death of Constantius II (317–361), Julian became emperor and began his campaign against Christianity in hopes of restoring paganism. “He commanded all towns to reopen the temples for pagan worship, restored animal sacrifices, and assumed the duties of a Pontifex Maximus. The Christians were united in fighting their enemy. Julian issued a decree that all titles to lands, rights, and immunities bestowed since the reign of Constantine upon the Galileans, as he contemptuously called the Christians, were abrogated, and that the monies granted to the Church from the revenues of the state must be repaid. He forbade the appointment of Christians as teachers of rhetoric and grammar.”<sup>104</sup> His edict also recalled heretical bishops that had been sent into exile. Under the guise of restoring freedom of religion, Julian’s decree was expressly designed to suppress and undermine Christianity within the empire.

Julian wrote an anti-Christian polemic, *Against the Galileans*, while preparing for a war against Persia. During that war, Julian’s army ran out of provisions and was forced to retreat. He was later killed by an arrow at the Battle of Samarra on June 26, 363.

Julian makes two significant admissions that deserve our attention. The first comes from a letter to the pagan high priest Arsacius. The letter survives as a fragment. The second passage comes from his satirical work, *Misopogon (Beard-Hater)*, in which he chides the pagans of Antioch and compares them with Christians.



## TESTIMONY

The religion of the Greeks does not yet prosper as I would wish, on account of those who profess it. But the gifts of the gods are great and splendid, better than any prayer or any hope. . . . Indeed, a little while ago no one would have dared even to pray for such a change, and so complete a one in so short a space of time. Why then do we think that this is sufficient and do not observe how the kindness of Christians to strangers, their care for the burial of their dead, and the sobriety of their lifestyle has done the most to advance their cause?

Each of these things, I think, ought really to be practiced by us. It is not sufficient for you alone to practice them, but so must all the priests in Galatia without exception. Either make these men good by shaming them, persuade them to become so or fire them. . . . Secondly, exhort the priests neither to approach a theater nor to drink in a tavern, nor to profess any base or infamous trade. Honor those who obey and expel those who disobey.

Erect many hostels, one in each city, in order that strangers may enjoy my kindness, not only those of our own faith but also of others whosoever is in want of money. I have just been devising a plan by which you will be able to get supplies. For I have ordered that every year throughout all Galatia 30,000 modii of grain and 60,000 pints of wine shall be provided. The fifth part of these I order to be expended on the poor who serve the priests, and the rest must be distributed from me to strangers and beggars. For it is disgraceful when no Jew is a beggar and the impious Galileans [Christians] support our poor in addition to their own; everyone is able to see that our coreligionists are in want of aid from us. Teach also those who profess the Greek religion to contribute to such services, and the villages of the Greek religion to offer the first-fruits to the gods. Accustom those of the Greek religion to such benevolence, teaching them that this has been our work from ancient times. Homer, at any rate, made Eumaeus say: "O stranger, it is not lawful for me, even if one poorer than you should come, to dishonor a stranger. For all strangers and beggars are from Zeus. The gift is small, but it is precious."<sup>105</sup> Do not therefore let others outdo us in good deeds while we ourselves are disgraced by laziness; rather, let us not quite abandon our piety toward the gods. . .

We must pay special attention to this point, and by this means effect a cure. For when it came about that the poor were neglected and overlooked by the priests, then I think the impious Galileans observed this fact and devoted themselves to philanthropy. And they have gained ascendancy in the worst of their deeds through the credit they win for such practices. For just as those who entice children with a cake, and by throwing it to them two or three times induce them to follow them, and then, when they are far away from their friends cast them on board a ship and sell them as slaves, and that which for the moment seems sweet, proves to be bitter for all the rest of their lives—by the same method, I say, the Galileans, also begin with their so-called love-feast, or hospitality, or service of tables, for they have many ways of carrying it out and hence call it by many names—and the result is that they have led very many into atheism.[106](#)

Julian's letter assumes that the only way paganism can compete with Christianity is for the pagan priests to start acting like Christians. The emperor believed that Christianity spread, not because it was true, but because of Christians' "care for the burial of their dead, and the sobriety of their lifestyle." Julian states that it's shameful that "the impious Galileans [Christians] support our poor in addition to their own; everyone is able to see that our coreligionists are in want of aid from us."

#### HOSTILE WITNESS

In the business world, any company that promotes itself as being like its competitors will soon go out of business. The very act concedes its competitors' superiority. Why buy an off-brand soda when you can have the real thing? Julian's reformation of paganism along the lines of Christian practice and lifestyle concedes that Christians are superior to pagans.

Julian and Lucian of Samosata encountered and reacted to Christian charity in two different ways. Lucian mocked Christian charity, "voluntary self-devotion," brotherhood, and detachment from worldly goods, as something odd and worthy of ridicule (see chapter fourteen). Here Julian is forcing paganism to embrace these same things in order to save itself from oblivion. But Lucian understood something that Julian missed: Christian charity is not a gimmick to pad the pews (or, as Julian put it, like giving cake to children to entice them to board a slave ship). Charity, voluntary

self-devotion, brotherhood, and detachment from worldly goods are the fruit of the law of Christ and intrinsic to the Christian worldview. Christians strive to imitate Christ, who commanded: “Love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another” (John 13:34). Likewise, the Epistle of James teaches that “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained by the world” (James 1:27). Whatever is done to the least ones is done for Christ (Matt. 25:40), for “Whoever is without love does not know God, for God is love” (1 John 4:8). Christian charity isn’t merely something Christians do, it is what Christians are.

This does not mean that pagans were devoid of kindness. Every culture encourages hospitality to strangers, as Julian’s quote from Homer’s *Odyssey* shows. Christian charity, however, goes far beyond mere hospitality. It embraces all the marginalized, even those who hate and persecute Christians.<sup>107</sup> Kindness to strangers and family members is a natural virtue. One may find in nature a deer that runs into a burning forest to save a fawn, but you’ll never find a deer running into a burning forest to save a lion. The command “love your enemies” demands something that is beyond unaided human nature. Julian failed to recognize this.

His exhortations illustrate just how foreign caring for the poor and marginalized truly was to the pagan worldview. Even Julian’s letter wasn’t motivated by compassion: he wished to make these changes purely for pragmatic reasons, to bring people back to the pagan temples. But Julian’s program was doomed from the start because it didn’t start from the grassroots (paganism motivating its adherents to charitable work); rather, it came from the top down (the will of the emperor accompanied by state subsidies).

Whereas Julian’s program failed and paganism came to nothing, Christian charity grew—expanding from local parishes to monasteries. By the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, monasteries had developed a harmonious system whereby the wealthy donated money for the care of the poor and the poor in return prayed for the souls of their benefactors. After the English Reformation, King Henry VIII’s suppression of the Catholic monasteries (1536, 1541) dealt a death blow to this equilibrium. His suppression affected not only the Catholic religious who worked and prayed

in the monasteries, but also the poor who depended on the monks and nuns, creating a vacuum that needed to be filled. Edward and Elizabeth I filled that vacuum by enacting the Poor Laws, which taxed local parishes to provide for the poor. The Poor Laws were modified in the nineteenth century, and were eventually replaced by the modern welfare system during World War II. The motivation for charity was effectively transferred from the love of Christ to the coercion of the state. Julian had to use the power of the state to compete with Christian charity; England used its power to replace Christian charity.

Julian also provides a very brief comparison between Jewish and Christian charity. According to Julian, “it is disgraceful when no Jew is a beggar and the impious Galileans [i.e., Christians] support our poor in addition to their own.” Judaism has an admirable tradition of caring for the members within their community as well as almsgiving for the poor; as a result, Julian observes, “no Jew is a beggar.” Julian’s description of Christians, however, seems to go beyond that of Judaism. They support the poor “in addition to their own.” The same tradition of caring for the poor continues today.[108](#)

## CHRISTIAN CHARITY

### TESTIMONY

“It is a terrible thing,” I said, “that so important a city should be more neglectful of the gods than any village on the borders of the Pontus. Your city possesses ten thousand lots of land privately owned, and yet when the annual festival in honor of the God of her forefathers is to be celebrated for the first time since the gods dispelled the cloud of atheism, she does not produce on her own behalf a single bird, though she ought if possible to have sacrificed an ox for every tribe, or if that were too difficult, the whole city in common ought at any rate to have offered to the God one bull on her own behalf. Yet every one of you delights to spend money privately on dinners and feasts; and I know very well that many of you squandered very large sums of money on dinners during the May festival. Nevertheless, on your own behalf and on behalf of the city’s welfare not one of the citizens offers a private sacrifice, nor does the city offer a public sacrifice, but only this priest!

...

But as it is, every one of you allows his wife to carry everything out of his house to the Galileans, and when your wives feed the poor at your expense they inspire a great admiration for godlessness in those who are in need of such bounty—and of such sort are, I think, the great majority of mankind—while as for yourselves you think that you are doing nothing out of the way when in the first place you are careless of the honors due to the gods, and not one of those in need goes near the temples—for there is nothing there, I think, to feed them with—and yet when any one of you gives a birthday feast he provides a dinner and a breakfast without stint and welcomes his friends to a costly table; when, however, the annual festival arrived no one furnished olive oil for a lamp for the God, or a libation, or a beast for sacrifice, or incense. Now I do not know how any good man could endure to see such things in your city, and for my part I am sure that it is displeasing to the gods also.”<sup>109</sup>

The *Misopogon* (or *Beard-Hater*) is a satire wherein Julian ridicules the people of Antioch as a bearded philosopher amongst a generation who have shaved their beards. The people of Antioch have abandoned their temple feasts, preferring to spend their wealth on themselves, while the Christians spend their wealth on the poor. Julian attempts to shame the people by expressing how disappointing their behavior is to him as well as to the gods.

#### HOSTILE WITNESS

Hyperbole aside, Julian speaks about the same problem Pliny the Younger encountered: the pagan temples are abandoned and few offer sacrifices to the gods on feast days. Julian, once again, returns to what he believes is the problem: Christians care for the poor and feed those who are hungry. Therefore, the poor become Christian so that they can receive something to eat, whereas in paganism, according to Julian, “not one of those in need goes near the temples—for there is nothing there, I think, to feed them with.” But why didn’t the priests of the temples care about the poor? Their belief-system simply didn’t encourage it. Caring for the poor was not integral to being pagan, as it was to being Christian.

<sup>104</sup> Karl Hoeber, “Julian the Apostate,” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 8 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910). <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08558b.htm>. Accessed online

December 14, 2015.

[105](#) Homer's *Odyssey*, book 14, line 531.

[106](#) Quoted in Edward J. Chinnock, *A Few Notes on Julian and a Translation of His Public Letters* (London: David Nutt, 1901), 75–76.

[107](#) Matthew 5:43–44; Luke 6:27, 35.

[108](#) Catholic charities generally give aid to anyone who is in need regardless of their religion or whether they will ever step foot into a Catholic church.

[109](#) Julian, *Misopogon*, from *The Works of the Emperor Julian*, trans. W.C. Wright (New York: MacMillan, 1913), 2: 491–492.

## Julian and the Jerusalem Temple

The most audacious of all of Julian's anti-Christian measures was his attempt to rebuild the Jerusalem temple. Julian had a much more favorable attitude toward Judaism than Christianity; rebuilding the temple could be seen as part of his beneficence toward the Jews. There was, however, an ulterior motive to the project. If Julian could rebuild the temple and restore the Old Covenant sacrifices, it would, to some extent, undermine the credibility of Christianity. To fully appreciate the significance of Julian's undertaking and its failure, we must take a quick look at Christian sources.

The Jerusalem temple was the epicenter of Jewish worship. Without it, the Jewish people could not fulfill the prescriptions of the Old Covenant sacrificial system. When Herod's massive restoration of the temple was nearing its completion, Jesus predicted that the temple would be destroyed within one generation (Matt. 24:1–35; Mark 13:1–31; Luke 19:42–45; 21:5–32). His prophecy was fulfilled in A.D. 70 when the Romans destroyed the temple. In the early second Christian century, the Jews waged the Second Jewish Revolt (A.D. 132–136) in hopes of gaining autonomy over Judea and rebuilding the temple. The revolt failed, ending all hope of restoring the temple sacrifices.

The temple's destruction was significant in another way. Jesus fulfilled all that the temple signified. He is "greater than the temple" (Matt. 12:6), and his words "Destroy this temple and in three days I will rebuild it" referred to his body that would die and be resurrected (John 2:18–21). Christ's death on the cross fulfilled all that the Old Covenant sacrifices signified. Moreover, he also instituted the eucharistic sacrifice that is offered "from the rising of the sun to its setting" (Mal. 1:10–11). The institution of this sacrifice implies that God would no longer accept the sacrifices offered in the temple.

Julian the Apostate's bid to rebuild the temple was a gutsy move. If completed, it could have been seen by many as a divine rejection of Christianity. But Julian's gambit backfired, and it is the aftermath of his project, not Julian or his words, which will be our next hostile witness.

## TESTIMONY

There are several testimonies that recount Julian's rebuilding project and its aftermath. Only three will be provided here, since they come from three different perspectives. The first two witnesses—the pagan historian Ammianus Marcellinus and the early Christian historian Sozomen—lived close to the time of the rebuilding project. The third testimony was written centuries after the event by a rabbi named Gadaliah. It provides a Jewish account of the event.

### AMMIANUS MARCELLINUS

Ammianus Marcellinus (ca. 330–390) was a Roman soldier and historian. His book *Res Gestae* recorded the history of the Roman Empire from A.D. 96 to 378. Only the latter portion of his work has survived. It covers the period 353 to 378. He is known for his sober and accurate assessment of the events he recorded. For example, he described Emperor Constantius II as stirring “very many disputes” within Christianity and writes that “as these [disputes] spread widely he [Constantius] nourished them with arguments about words.”<sup>110</sup> Marcellinus's assessment comports perfectly with Christian sources about the semi-Arian emperor. Marcellinus is also unique among pagan historians in that he was not afraid to comment on contemporary Christian events. Pagan historians studiously ignored Christianity in their writings, even after the legalization of Christianity.

It may be inaccurate to describe Ammianus Marcellinus as a hostile witness. Although he was an admirer of Julian the Apostate, he doesn't appear to be hostile to Christianity. Being neither friend nor foe to the Faith, he provides an objective description of Julian's project from a pagan perspective:

Julian thought to rebuild at an extravagant expense the proud temple once at Jerusalem, and committed this task to Alypius of Antioch. Alypius set vigorously to work, and was seconded by the governor of the province; when fearful balls of fire, breaking out near the foundations, continued their attacks, till the workmen, after repeated scorplings, could approach no more; and he gave up the attempt.<sup>111</sup>

Marcellinus's brief report demonstrates a few salient points. Julian's order to rebuild the Jerusalem temple was not a small project. He had committed large funds toward its completion. The project also required the cooperation



of at least two key figures: a geographer named Alypius of Antioch, and the governor of the province. Marcellinus notes that after vigorous work had begun on the project it was halted by the presence of “fearful balls of fire,” which came out from the ground near the foundations. The fire attacks continued until workmen could no longer be at the worksite without being scorched. The project was then abandoned. Although Marcellinus does not say so, it appears that the unusual phenomenon continued only when the workmen were at the site and that it ceased after the project was abandoned. Marcellinus does not assign any religious significance to these events. He simply lays out the facts as if they were commonly known.

With Marcellinus’ account in mind, we now turn to a near contemporary of these events, the Christian historian Sozomen. Sozomen was a native Palestinian whose recollection of these events is based on eyewitness accounts.

SOZOMEN (CA. 400–CA. 450)

Events proved that this was his real motive; for he sent for some of the chiefs of the race and exhorted them to return to the observance of the laws of Moses and the customs of their fathers. On their replying that because the temple in Jerusalem was overturned, it was neither lawful nor ancestral to do this in another place than the metropolis out of which they had been cast, he gave them public money, commanded them to rebuild the temple, and to practice the cult similar to that of their ancestors, by sacrificing after the ancient way. The Jews entered upon the undertaking, without reflecting that, according to the prediction of the holy prophets, it could not be accomplished. They sought for the most skillful artisans, collected materials, cleared the ground, and entered so earnestly upon the task, that even the women carried heaps of earth, and brought their necklaces and other female ornaments toward defraying the expense. The emperor, the other pagans, and all the Jews, regarded every other undertaking as secondary in importance to this.

Although the pagans were not well-disposed toward the Jews, yet they assisted them in this enterprise, because they reckoned upon its ultimate success, and hoped by this means to falsify the prophecies of Christ. Besides this motive, the Jews themselves were impelled by the

consideration that the time had arrived for rebuilding their temple. When they had removed the ruins of the former building, they dug up the ground and cleared away its foundation; it is said that on the following day when they were about to lay the first foundation, a great earthquake occurred, and by the violent agitation of the earth, stones were thrown up from the depths, by which those of the Jews who were engaged in the work were wounded, as likewise those who were merely looking on. The houses and public porticos, near the site of the temple, in which they had diverted themselves, were suddenly thrown down; many were caught thereby, some perished immediately, others were found half dead and mutilated of hands or legs, others were injured in other parts of the body. When God caused the earthquake to cease, the workmen who survived again returned to their task, partly because such was the edict of the emperor, and partly because they were themselves interested in the undertaking. . . . But all parties relate, that they had scarcely returned to the undertaking, when fire burst suddenly from the foundations of the temple, and consumed several of the workmen.

This fact is fearlessly stated, and believed by all; the only discrepancy in the narrative is that some maintain that flame burst from the interior of the temple, as the workmen were striving to force an entrance, while others say that the fire proceeded directly from the earth. In whichever way the phenomenon might have occurred, it is equally wonderful. A more tangible and still more extraordinary prodigy ensued; suddenly the sign of the cross appeared spontaneously on the garments of the persons engaged in the undertaking. These crosses were disposed like stars, and appeared the work of art. Many were hence led to confess that Christ is God, and that the rebuilding of the temple was not pleasing to him; others presented themselves in the church, were initiated, and besought Christ, with hymns and supplications, to pardon their transgression. If any one does not feel disposed to believe my narrative, let him go and be convinced by those who heard the facts I have related from the eyewitnesses of them, for they are still alive. Let him inquire, also, of the Jews and pagans who left the work in an incomplete state, or who, to speak more accurately, were able to commence it.[112](#)

Since Sozomen is a Christian historian, we will put his personal commentary aside and stick with the facts as he records them.<sup>113</sup> Sozomen confirms aspects of Marcellinus's account and adds some extra details. For example, Sozomen states that the motivation behind rebuilding the temple was that Julian and the pagans wished to "falsify the prophecies of Christ." The Jews, he speculates, believed that the time had come for the temple to be restored. Both claims are quite plausible. Sozomen, like Marcellinus, indicates that Julian's project was a major undertaking being subsidized by the emperor's funds. He also adds that the Jews made personal contributions to the project and arranged for the needed craftsmen. Sozomen then points out something that Marcellinus omitted: an earthquake that caused considerable damage occurred at the beginning of the project. Both Sozomen and Marcellinus agree about a mysterious fire erupting. Sozomen says, "All parties relate, that they had scarcely returned to the undertaking, when fire burst suddenly from the foundations of the temple, and consumed several of the workmen." The phrase "all parties relate" indicates that he is relying on multiple witnesses, and that their testimonies were unanimous on this point. Sozomen also states emphatically that what he relates is "fearlessly stated, and believed by all." The only disagreement among Sozomen's sources was about where the fire originated.

Sozomen also adds a second, more spectacular phenomenon not mentioned by Marcellinus: the spontaneous appearance of crosses on the workers garments, which resulted in numerous conversions. The phenomenon seems so fantastic that it would be easy to write off as apocryphal, but Sozomen claims that the repentant workers presented themselves to local churches and converted. This makes Sozomen's claim verifiable. Indeed, it's quite possible that Sozomen relied on these converts for his sources. Realizing how fantastic this claim would appear to his readers, Sozomen challenges his readers to verify this information for themselves: "Let him go and be convinced by those who heard the facts I have related from the eyewitnesses of them, for they are still alive. Let him inquire, also, of the Jews and pagans who left the work in an incomplete state, or who, to speak more accurately, were able to commence it."

Both Marcellinus and Sozomen confirm several basic facts, and the additional information given by Sozomen appears to have been based on

multiple sources from different religious backgrounds.

RABBI GADALIAH (15TH CENTURY)

Our third witness is Jewish, one Rabbi Gadaliah, who wrote sometime in the fifteenth century. This testimony is too late to be considered credible. Moreover, it is difficult to discern what source or sources Rabbi Gadaliah relied on for his information. Nevertheless, his testimony is valuable in that it shows that even centuries later these events remained in the collective memory of the Jewish people, and were apparently recorded in a book called *Annals*.

TESTIMONY

In the days of R. Channan, and his brethren, about the year 4349, our annals tell us, that there was a great earthquake over all the world: by which the temple, which the Jews had raised at Jerusalem, with vast expense, at the command of the emperor Julian the apostate, was thrown down. The next day after the earthquake, a dreadful fire fell from heaven, by which all the iron-work of the building were melted, and many, yea, innumerable Jews were consumed.[114](#)

Although this text is too late to have any probative value, Rabbi Gadaliah's remarks show that memory of Julian's failure continued within the Jewish community for centuries. His text confirms several points made by our other two authors; namely, that Julian began the reconstruction of the temple at great expense, that an earthquake occurred, that the workers suffered from fire burns with "innumerable" casualties, and that the project was halted. It's possible that Gadaliah's claim that the fire "came down from heaven" was not meant to be a factual assertion, but a literary device used to show that the fire was a chastisement from God (cf. Gen. 19:24; 2 Kings 1:9–14). The account given by Rabbi Gadaliah is said to have come from "our annals." What source or sources the "annals" used is impossible to tell.

Although the rabbi's description is worthless in terms of direct evidence, it does show that the Jewish community was well aware that a miraculous disaster occurred, a disaster noteworthy enough to be remembered by the Jews centuries later.

JULIAN THE APOSTATE

All three witnesses testify to a strange occurrence that caused the rebuilding of the temple to be abandoned. What about Julian? Did he leave any reaction about this failure? There is a fragment of a letter (or perhaps an oration) by Julian that seems to allude to the tragedy in Jerusalem. He writes,

Let no one disbelieve the gods, from seeing and hearing that their statues and their temples have been insulted in some quarters. Let no one beguile us by his speeches, or unsettle us on the score of Providence; for those who reproach us on this head, I mean the prophets of the Jews, what will they say about their own temple, which has been thrice overthrown, and is not even now rising? This I have said with no wish to reproach them, inasmuch as I myself, at so late a day, had in purpose to rebuild it for the honor of him who was worshipped there. Here I have alluded to it, with the purpose of shewing that of human things nothing is imperishable, and that the prophets who wrote as I have mentioned, raved, and were but the gossips of canting old women. Nothing, indeed, contradicts the notion of that God being great, but he is unfortunate in his prophets and interpreters; I say that they did not take care to purify their souls by a course of education, nor to open their fast-closed eyes, nor to dissipate the darkness which lay on them. And, like men who see a great light through a mist, not clearly nor distinctly, and take it not for pure light, but for fire, and are blind to all things around about it, they cry out loudly, "Shudder and fear; fire, flame, death, sword, lance," expressing by many words that one destructive property of fire.[115](#)

The fragment is a bit obscure. John Henry Newman suggests the following interpretation:

When it is considered that Julian was, as it were, defeated by the prophets of that very people he was aiding; that he desired to rebuild the Jewish temple, and the Christians declared that he could not, for the Jewish prophets themselves had made it impossible; we surely may believe, that in the foregoing passage this was the thought which was passing in his mind, while the prophetic emblem of fire haunted him, which had been so recently exhibited in the catastrophe by which he had been baffled.[116](#)

If Christ's prophecy about the destruction of the temple provides positive evidence for the truth of Christianity, then Julian the Apostate's abject failure to discredit Christianity by rebuilding the temple is positive evidence as well, especially considering the bizarre events that caused the project to be abandoned.

#### CONCLUSION

At this stage in history, Christianity has transitioned from a pesky superstition barely worthy of notice to a mass movement. Several pagan authors took to the task of refuting Christianity, but only a few made any impact, the most notable being Celsus, Porphyry, and the apostate emperor Julian. Others such as Lucian attacked only because the occasion called for it.

Many of their concessions and presuppositions echo those of previous hostile witnesses, especially concerning the authenticity of Christian miracles: miraculous feats are never denied but are attributed to magic and sorcery. Celsus, for example, claimed that Jesus learned magic in Egypt and taught his followers the same magical arts. If this is true, then it's strange that the Egyptian magicians who wrote the Greek Magical Papyri failed to recognize Jesus as a fellow magician. Instead, they invoke him as "the god of the Hebrews." Apparently, they saw something far greater in Jesus than could be reproduced by their magical arts. Porphyry claimed, as some do even today, that Jesus' miraculous feats were no different than those of pagan wonder-workers, such as Apollonius of Tyana. Apollonius, who didn't know about Christ or Christianity, probably wouldn't have agreed, since he considered a "real miracle" as something akin to Christ and Peter walking on the sea.

The bewilderment about Christian charity and holiness by our hostile witnesses is fascinating. Lucian mocked how Christians believe that they are all brothers, and ridiculed their self-devotion and detachment from worldly goods; Christian charity was as foreign to him as the Theory of Relativity. What Lucian ridiculed, Julian tried to imitate: Julian's major anti-Christian program included reforming the pagan priesthood so as to mimic the Christian lifestyle, counseling the pagan priests to stop attending gladiatorial games, to quit working at lurid or sordid occupations, and most especially to start giving food and money to the poor.

At the summit of Julian's efforts to malign Christianity was his project to rebuild the Jerusalem temple and restore the sacrificial system of the Old Covenant, which Christ fulfilled. It was a mammoth project. Backed and funded by the emperor, administrators were appointed and work began with great enthusiasm. The Jews, likewise thrilled by the prospect of the temples' return, contributed money and skilled laborers for the project. Then something happened. All sources (Christian, pagan, Jewish) attest to a strange fire that attacked the workers. These attacks were so severe that the project, despite its impressive backing, was forced to be abandoned.

The hostile witnesses of this period also introduce a new tactic for undermining Christianity: affirming Christ, but calling into question whether Christians were telling the truth about him and his teachings. Porphyry and Julian the Apostate used this tactic in different ways. Porphyry's "Apollo" said that the gods affirmed Christ to be pious (that is, a good pagan), but they condemned his Church because his followers supposedly corrupted his teachings and were involved in error. This divide-and-conquer technique of affirming Christ (or God) while denying the integrity of his Church will be employed by later hostile witnesses as well.

#### FURTHER READING

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<sup>110</sup> Ammanius Marcellinus, *Res Gestae*, 21, 16, 18, in *The Roman History of Ammianus Marcellinus*, trans. C.D. Yonge (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1911), 275.

<sup>111</sup> *Res Gestae*, book 23, chapter 1, line 3.

<sup>112</sup> Sozomen, *Church History*, 5, 22. NPNF 3:344.

<sup>113</sup> Two other early Church Fathers also recorded these events: Gregory of Nazianzus and the Church historian Socrates. Sozomen's account was chosen because of its reliance on multiple witnesses.

<sup>114</sup> Gadaliah's text is dubious. It comes from William Warburton's "Julian; or, a discourse concerning the earthquake and fiery eruption which defeated the emperor's attempt to rebuild the Jerusalem Temple" (London: J & P Knapton, 1750), 69. It is one of two fifteenth/sixteenth-century

Jewish texts given. Its importance here is simply to show that the memory of those events continued within the Jewish community for centuries. The details related by this text are too late to have any other evidentiary value.

<sup>115</sup> As quoted in John Henry Newman's *Two Essays on Biblical and Ecclesiastical Miracles* (London: Longman, Green, 1907), 338–339.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 339.



## Part V

# Islam and the Crusades

Moving from the fourth century to the eighth century, our next group of testimonies comes from the rise of Islam and the time of the Crusades.

The great Catholic historian Hilaire Belloc identified Islam as a Christian heresy, which he called Muhammedism. This may seem odd since Muhammed was not a Christian; he was originally a pagan. Belloc argues, however, that the core teachings that distinguish Islam from paganism came from Catholic doctrine, albeit in an oversimplified state. Therefore, Christian contemporaries of Muhammed saw Islam, not as a new religion, but as a Christian heresy.<sup>117</sup> Belloc's explanation, if correct, explains why Islam's holy book, the Qur'an, affirms several uniquely Catholic teachings that are denied by many non-Catholic Christians today.

The Crusades is another story. Outside of the Inquisition, there is probably no other event in Church history that has been as distorted and as effectively used in anti-Catholic propaganda as the Crusades. Originally, the myth of the Crusades was employed by politicians to instill fear and dread of Catholicism in the hearts of the Protestant citizenry. The Crusades, went the myth, illustrated the papacy's insatiable desire to expand its power through forced conversions while profiteering from its military aggression. In the United States, the myth was used to fan the flames of anti-Catholicism among Protestant Americans in the early nineteenth century. Once the Church lost the Papal States in 1870, however, the myth of the Crusades receded into the shadows—until the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center brought it back into the limelight. Within a month of that event, no less than former president Bill Clinton told students at Georgetown University that “we” (the Christian West) “are still paying” for the Crusades, echoing the accusations of Osama bin Laden himself. And militant atheists such as Sam Harris have repurposed the myth of the Crusades as proof of the intolerance, aggression, endemic anti-Semitism, and even genocidal nature of all religion (but especially Christianity).

But since 9/11, new and better scholarly works on the Crusades have been published that call into question the tenets of the old no-popery myth and its modern version. Bad things did indeed happen over the Crusades'

four-hundred-year history, but the hostile witnesses in this part will show that anti-Catholic and anti-religious propaganda has painted these events with too broad a brush, and that the true story of the Crusades is much more complex and nuanced than the popular myth.

<sup>117</sup> [Hilaire Belloc](#), *The Great Heresies* (Manassas, VA: Trinity Communications, 1987), 55–56.

## The Qur'an

The holy book of Islam is the Qur'an. Muslims believe that God revealed the Qur'an to Muhammed through the angel Jibril (Gabriel). These revelations began in A.D. 609, and it took about twenty-three years before the Qur'an was completed. For Islam, the Qur'an is God's final revelation to mankind, superseding all previous revelation.

The value of the Qur'an as a hostile witness is limited. It was written too late to give any direct evidence for Jesus. Having been written in the seventh century, however, it does lend support to several key Christian doctrines, including some that Protestants have dismissed as Catholic inventions.

### THE VIRGIN BIRTH

#### TESTIMONY

(And remember) when the angels said: O Mary! Lo! Allah giveth thee glad tidings of a word from him, whose name is the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, illustrious in the world and the hereafter, and one of those brought near (unto Allah). He will speak unto mankind in his cradle and in his manhood, and he is of the righteous. She said: My Lord! How can I have a child when no mortal hath touched me? he said: So (it will be). Allah createth what he will. If he decreeth a thing, he saith unto it only: Be! And it is.[118](#)

#### HOSTILE WITNESS

The Qur'an gives its own version of the Annunciation and affirms Christ's Virgin Birth. The Virgin Birth is unique to Jesus even in the Qur'an. Muhammed, who Muslims consider to be the final and greatest prophet, was not born of a virgin. Notice also in this passage that Jesus is identified as the Messiah.

### CHRIST'S MIRACLES

#### TESTIMONY

Lo! I come unto you with a sign from your Lord. Lo! I fashion for you out of clay the likeness of a bird, and I breathe into it and it is a bird, by Allah's leave. I heal him who was born blind, and the leper, and I

raise the dead, by Allah's leave. And I announce unto you what ye eat and what ye store up in your houses.[119](#)

#### HOSTILE WITNESS

Although Islam emphatically denies that Jesus is God, it does affirm that Jesus worked miracles (see also Qur'an 2:87). The miracles described in our passage are found in an apocryphal Christian text called *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas*. Nevertheless, the Qur'an does include authentic miracles. For example, Surah 3:49 mentions healing the blind, cleansing lepers (cf. Matt. 8:2; Mark 1:40–42; Luke 17:12–15; John 9:2–32), and raising the dead (cf. Matt. 9:18–23; Mark 5:35–43; Luke 7:11–16; 8:49–56; John 11:43). The same is not claimed for Muhammed, who, according to the Qur'an, performed no miracles.[120](#)

#### CHRIST'S ASCENSION

##### TESTIMONY

(And remember) when Allah said: O Jesus! Lo! I am gathering thee and causing thee to ascend unto me, and am cleansing thee of those who disbelieve and am setting those who follow thee above those who disbelieve until the day of resurrection.[121](#)

According to Islam, Jesus did not die on the cross, but rather he was taken bodily into heaven. Christians hold that Christ ascended to heaven by his own power, whereas the Qur'an has Jesus assumed to heaven by Allah.

#### JESUS IS THE ESCHATOLOGICAL PROPHET

##### TESTIMONY

And lo! Verily there is knowledge of the hour. So doubt ye not concerning it, but follow me. This is the right path.[122](#)

The Yusuf Ali translation fills in the context a little better. It reads, “ And (Jesus) shall be a Sign (for the coming of) the hour (of Judgment): therefore have no doubt about the (hour), but follow ye me: this is a straight way.” The Qur'an teaches that Jesus will return at the end of time as one of several signs that the hour of the resurrection has come near. It's interesting that it is Jesus, not Muhammed, who will be one of those signs. An Islamic oral tradition (*hadith*) teaches that Jesus will come back as a just judge:

By him in whose hand is my life, the son of Mary (peace be upon him) will descend among you as a just judge. He will break crosses, kill swine and abolish Jizya and the wealth will pour forth to such an extent that no one will accept it (*Sahîh Muslim*, 155).[123](#)

The Second Coming is presented as an anti-Christian polemic since one of the things Jesus will do is “break crosses.” Islam denies that Jesus died on the cross. Therefore, crosses and crucifixes are abhorrent to their beliefs.

#### THE CHURCH CORRUPTED THE GOSPEL

##### TESTIMONY

Then we caused our messengers to follow in their footsteps; and we caused Jesus, son of Mary, to follow, and gave him the gospel, and placed compassion and mercy in the hearts of those who followed him. But monasticism they invented—we ordained it not for them—only seeking Allah’s pleasure, and they observed it not with right observance. So we give those of them who believe their reward, but many of them are evil-livers.[124](#)

Allah gave Jesus the gospel. If this were true, why don’t Muslims follow the gospel? Islam believes that Christians had corrupted Jesus’ authentic gospel as well as the New Testament. Therefore, Allah sent Muhammed a revelation to restore the truth.

The Qur’an in its own way affirms Jesus and the gospel, but charges Christianity with corrupting the original message. Christians, according to the Surah, “invented monasticism . . . and they observed it not with right observance.” This same line of thought was prominent in the last part, where we saw Christ affirmed but his Church charged with corruption and error (see chapter fourteen).

#### JESUS AND MARY SINLESS

##### TESTIMONY

And when the angels said: O Mary! Lo! Allah hath chosen thee and made thee pure, and hath preferred thee above (all) the women of creation.[125](#)

And Mary, daughter of ‘Imran, whose body was chaste, therefore we breathed therein something of our Spirit. And she put faith in the words of her Lord and his Scripture, and was of the obedient.[126](#)

He said: I am only a messenger of thy Lord, that I may bestow on thee a faultless Son.[127](#)

Abu Huraira reported Allah's messenger (may peace be upon him) as saying: the Satan touches every son of Adam on the day when his mother gives birth to him with the exception of Mary and her son.<sup>[128](#)</sup>

Islam does not have a doctrine of original sin, but there are indications in the Qur'an and the oral traditions (*hadiths*) that teach that God uniquely protected Jesus and his mother from the devil. In fact, *Hadith Sahih Muslim*, quoted above, explicitly states that both were excluded from the dominion of Satan at birth. St. Augustine made essentially the same point about Mary:

Notwithstanding the obligation for Mary to contract the sin through her birth, she was not a slave to Satan, because the said obligation became inoperative by virtue of the grace of regeneration.<sup>[129](#)</sup>

In Catholic thought, Mary is the antithesis of fallen Eve. Although God made Eve sinless and in friendship with himself, she sinned and fell under the dominion of the devil. Mary, however, through a singular act of God, was conceived in friendship with God and remained outside of the devil's dominion.<sup>[130](#)</sup>

The belief in Mary's protection from the devil comes very close to that of the Catholic doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, namely that "in the first instance of her conception . . . [the Virgin Mary] was preserved exempt from all stain of original sin."<sup>[131](#)</sup> The passages from the Qur'an and the *hadiths* do not teach the Immaculate Conception, but they come as close as any religious system could with no understanding of original sin, sanctifying grace, or divinization.

#### HOSTILE WITNESS

Christians believe that Jesus was always without sin, but only Catholics and the Orthodox hold that the same is true for his mother, Mary. Fundamentalist Protestants often accuse the Catholic Church of inventing the doctrine of Mary's Immaculate Conception when defining it in 1854. Our hostile witness shows, however, that that belief, or a belief that comes very close to it, was current in the seventh century. Islam sees both Jesus and Mary as being, in some ways, unique among all of humanity. Although it would be incorrect to read into this text a Christian understanding of the

fall and of original sin, it does show that Muslims agree with Catholics that Jesus and Mary are uniquely free from the devil's dominion.

#### JESUS AND MARY IN HEAVEN; MARY IS THE MOST EXALTED WOMAN

##### TESTIMONY

And we made the son of Mary and his mother a portent, and we gave them refuge on a height, a place of flocks and watersprings. O ye messengers! Eat of the good things, and do.[132](#)

Other English translations omit the phrase “a place of flocks,” which makes it appear that Jesus and Mary are given a place on earth.[133](#) But the Islamic conception of heaven is quite different from the Christian understanding. For Christians, heaven is where we behold the beatific vision. The beatitude of heaven cannot be compared to anything on earth (1 Cor. 2:9). Islam describes heaven more as an earthly garden paradise complete with fruit and a gushing stream of water from which to drink (Qur'an 37:41–46). If the place mentioned in the Surah above is heaven, then it suggests something close to the Catholic doctrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary; namely, that Mary, after the completion of her life was taken bodily into heaven. If this does not refer to heaven, then one wonders where was this special place?

#### MARY GREATEST OF ALL WOMEN

##### TESTIMONY

Lo! Allah preferred Adam and Noah and the family of Abraham *and the family of 'Imran* above (all his) creatures. They were descendants one of another. Allah is Hearer, Knower. (Remember) *when the wife of 'Imran* said: My Lord! I have vowed unto thee that which is in my belly as a consecrated (offering). Accept it from me. Lo! Thou, only thou, art the Hearer, the Knower! And when she was delivered she said: My Lord! Lo! I am delivered of a female—Allah knew best of what she was delivered—the male is not as the female; and lo! I have named her Mary, and lo! I crave thy protection for her and for her offspring from Satan the outcast.[134](#)

And when the angels said: O Mary! Lo! Allah hath chosen thee and made thee pure, and hath preferred thee above (all) the women of creation.[135](#)

In Surah 2:33–36, it says that Allah preferred (raised, exalted, chose) Adam, Noah, and the families of Abraham and ‘Imran above all creatures. Preferring Adam, Noah, and Abraham and his sons is understandable, but why the family of ‘Imran? According to the Qur’an, Mary is the daughter of ‘Imran (Qur’an 3:33). Therefore, Jesus and Mary are said to be preferred (raised, exalted, chosen) above every creature. Likewise, Surah 3:42 states that Allah has preferred Mary above all the women of creation. The same is echoed in the oral tradition as well.<sup>136</sup>

Islam’s views on Mary surely came through contact with seventh-century Christians in what is now Saudi Arabia. It illustrates that the ancient Christian faith likewise held Mary in very high esteem. A tradition of Muhammed also records that he told his wife Fatima that in paradise she will be the most esteemed lady after Mary, daughter of ‘Imran (i.e., the Virgin Mary, Mother of Jesus). Therefore, not only is Mary in paradise, but she is the most exalted and esteemed woman there.<sup>137</sup>

<sup>118</sup> Qur’an, Surah 3:45–47. All quotations from the Qur’an come from Muhammad M. Pickthall, ed., *The Qur’an*, Perseus Digital Library, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text;jsessionid=F64FE67651F11EA118B3C03BE7824B68?doc=Perseus%3atext%3a2002.02.0002>. Accessed June 22, 2016.

<sup>119</sup> Qur’an, Surah 3:49.

<sup>120</sup> Surah 2:115–116, 145; 13:7; 29:50–51.

<sup>121</sup> Qur’an, Surah 3:55.

<sup>122</sup> Qur’an, Surah 43:61.

<sup>123</sup> *Sahîh Muslim*, 155.

<sup>124</sup> Qur’an, Surah 57:27.

<sup>125</sup> Qur’an, Surah 3:42.

<sup>126</sup> Qur’an, Surah 66:12.

<sup>127</sup> Qur’an, Surah 19:19.

<sup>128</sup> *Hadith Sahih Muslim*, book 30, number 5838, trans. Abdul Hamid Siddiqui. Online at [peacevision.com](http://peacevision.com).

<sup>129</sup> Augustine, *Against Julian*, book 4, 122, as quoted in Nilo Geagea’s *Mary of the Koran: A Meeting Point Between Christianity and Islam* (New York: Philosophical Library, Inc., 1984), 137.

<sup>130</sup> For more details, see Gary Michuta’s *Making Sense of Mary* (Pinckney, Michigan: Grotto Press, 2013).

<sup>131</sup> Pope Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus* (December, 8 1854).

<sup>132</sup> Qur’an, Surah 23:50–51.

<sup>133</sup> The Asad translation gives this text as “provided for both an abode in a lofty mace of lasting restfulness and unsullied springs.” The Malik translation: “and gave them a shelter on a peaceful lofty ground, furnished with a fresh spring.” The Yusuf Ali translation: “gave them both shelter on high ground affording rest and security and furnished with springs.”

<sup>134</sup> Qur’an, Surah 3:33–36.

<sup>135</sup> Qur’an, Surah 3:42.



136 *Sahih al-Bukhari*, 5, 58, 163.

137 *Al-Tirmidhi Hadith*, 1646.

## Abu ‘L-Husayn Muhammad Ibn Ahmad Ibn Jubayr (1145–1217)

Born in Muslim-occupied Valencia, Spain, Ibn Jubayr worked as a secretary to the ruler of Granada. One day in 1182 his employer tested his loyalty and piety by challenging him to drink seven cups of wine in exchange for gold. Jubayr at first refused, but upon his master’s insistence he pretended to sip the wine. Suddenly, his master was seized with guilt for what he had demanded of his employee and filled the wine cup seven times with gold dinars. Ibn Jubayr decided to use his newfound wealth to go on pilgrimage to Mecca. Accompanied by a physician, he began his journey on February 3, 1183, and returned to Spain two years later. Ibn Jubayr’s journey, therefore, placed him in a unique position to observe life as it existed between the Second Crusade (1145–1149) and the Third Crusade (1189–1192). Fortunately for us, he chronicled his journey in a work titled *The Travels of Ibn Jubayr*.

There are some today who paint the Crusades as nothing less than sometimes genocidal acts of aggression aimed at forcibly converting or slaughtering all Muslims in the name of Christ. Ibn Jubayr is a powerful hostile witness against this distorted understanding. He was a devout Muslim who had no love for Christianity or Christians, which he called “Franks.” Nevertheless, the observations made in his journal do paint a very different picture than that in popular myth.

### LIBERTY IN CHRISTIAN COUNTRIES

#### TESTIMONY

One of the strangest things in the world is that Muslim caravans go forth to Frankish lands, while Frankish captives enter Muslim lands.<sup>[138](#)</sup>

While traveling from Damascus to Acre, Ibn Jubayr makes this observation: Muslim caravans are allowed to travel freely within Christian-occupied territories, even while the Sultan Saladin had made advances and had taken Christians prisoner. There are some who attempt to paint the Crusades as a genocidal holy war in which militants and civilians were

indiscriminately slaughtered. Ibn Jubayr's observation shows that hostilities were largely confined to the battlefield and that trade caravans were free to travel on both sides. If the goal of the Crusades was the forced conversion of all Muslims to Christianity, it's doubtful that Muslim caravans would be free to travel unmolested in Christian lands.

#### LIBERTY FOR MUSLIMS IN CHRISTIAN LANDS

##### TESTIMONY

The greater part of those taxed [by the Franks] were Maghrebis, those from all other Muslim lands being unmolested. This was because some earlier Maghrebis had annoyed the Franks. A gallant company of them had attacked one of their strongholds with Nur-al-Din—may God have mercy upon them—and by its taking they had become manifestly rich and famous. The Franks punished them by this tax, and their chiefs enforced it. Every Maghrebi therefore paid this dinar for his hostility to their country. The Franks declared: “These Maghrebis came and went in our country and we treated them well and took nothing from them. But when they interfered in the war, joining with their brother Muslims against us, we were compelled to place this tax upon them.” In the payment of this tax, the Maghrebis are pleasingly reminded of their vexing of the enemy, and thus the payment of it is lightened and its harshness made tolerable.<sup>139</sup>

Once again, Ibn Jubayr speaks about a large degree of Muslim freedom within Christian-controlled territory. The caravans were taxed, but not to the point of being too burdensome, except for the Muslim Maghrebis, who had joined a rebellion against the Franks. Our hostile witness reports the Franks' thinking on the matter: the Christians treated the Maghrebis well and took nothing from them, yet they betrayed this trust and became combatants in the war. Therefore, the Christians were compelled to levy a tax, not on all Muslims in the territory, but only on the Maghrebis.

##### HOSTILE WITNESS

Punitive taxation is not unique to Christianity. In Islam, punitive taxation is mentioned in the Qur'an as the *jizya*. The Qur'an states,

Fight against such of those who have been given the Scripture as believe not in Allah nor the Last Day, and forbid not that which Allah

hath forbidden by his messenger, and follow not the religion of truth, until they pay the tribute readily, being brought low (Qur'an 9:29).

The purpose of the *jizya* is to make non-Muslims subservient to Muslims until they convert. According to the *Qur'an Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, Surah 9:29 is interpreted as:

Allah said, (until they pay the *jizyah*), if they do not choose to embrace Islam, (with willing submission), in defeat and subservience, (and feel themselves subdued), disgraced, humiliated and belittled. Therefore, Muslims are not allowed to honor the people of *Dhimmah* or elevate them above Muslims, for they are miserable, disgraced and humiliated. Muslim recorded from Abu Hurayrah that the prophet said, (Do not initiate the Salam to the Jews and Christians, and if you meet any of them in a road, force them to its narrowest alley.) This is why the leader of the faithful 'Umar bin Al-Khattab, may Allah be pleased with him, demanded his well-known conditions be met by the Christians, these conditions that ensured their continued humiliation, degradation, and disgrace. The scholars of Hadith narrated from 'Abdur-Rahman bin Ghanm Al-Ash'ari that he said, "I recorded for 'Umar bin Al-Khattab, may Allah be pleased with him, the terms of the treaty of peace he conducted with the Christians of Ash-Sham:

"In the name of Allah, most gracious, most merciful. This is a document to the servant of Allah 'Umar, the leader of the faithful, from the Christians of such and such city. When you (Muslims) came to us we requested safety for ourselves, children, property, and followers of our religion. We made a condition on ourselves that we will neither erect in our areas a monastery, church, or a sanctuary for a monk, nor restore any place of worship that needs restoration nor use any of them for the purpose of enmity against Muslims. We will not prevent any Muslim from resting in our churches whether they come by day or night, and we will open the doors (of our houses of worship) for the wayfarer and passerby. Those Muslims who come as guests, will enjoy boarding and food for three days. We will not allow a spy against Muslims into our churches and homes or hide deceit (or betrayal) against Muslims. We will not teach our children the Qur'an,

publicize practices of shirk, invite anyone to shirk or prevent any of our fellows from embracing Islam, if they choose to do so.

We will respect Muslims, move from the places we sit in if they choose to sit in them. We will not imitate their clothing, caps, turbans, sandals, hairstyles, speech, nicknames and title names, or ride on saddles, hang swords on the shoulders, collect weapons of any kind, or carry these weapons. We will not encrypt our stamps in Arabic, or sell liquor. We will have the front of our hair cut, wear our customary clothes wherever we are, wear belts around our waist, refrain from erecting crosses on the outside of our churches and demonstrating them and our books in public in Muslim fairways and markets. We will not sound the bells in our churches, except discreetly, or raise our voices while reciting our holy books inside our churches in the presence of Muslims, nor raise our voices (with prayer) at our funerals, or light torches in funeral processions in the fairways of Muslims, or their markets. We will not bury our dead next to Muslim dead, or buy servants who were captured by Muslims. We will be guides for Muslims and refrain from breaching their privacy in their homes.”

When I gave this document to ‘Umar, he added to it, “We will not beat any Muslim. These are the conditions that we set against ourselves and followers of our religion in return for safety and protection. If we break any of these promises that we set for your benefit against ourselves, then our *Dhimmah* (promise of protection) is broken and you are allowed to do with us what you are allowed of people of defiance and rebellion.”[140](#)

As you can see, the light taxation by the Franks (and even the heavier tax burden laid upon the Maghrebis) are nothing compared to the payment of the *jizya* and its many restrictions on those who remain Christian in Muslim lands. These measures were not merely fiscal, but were given in order to “ensure their continued humiliation, degradation and disgrace” until they converted to Islam.

#### CHRISTIAN AND MUSLIM LANDLORDS COMPARED

##### TESTIMONY

We moved from Tibnin—may God destroy it—at daybreak on Monday. Our way lay through continuous farms and ordered

settlements, whose inhabitants were all Muslims, living comfortably with the Franks. God protect us from such temptation. They surrender half their crops to the Franks at harvest time, and pay as well a poll-tax of one dinar and five qirat for each person. Other than that, they are not interfered with, save for a light tax on the fruits of trees. Their houses and all their effects are left to their full possession. All the coastal cities occupied by the Franks are managed in this fashion, their rural districts, the villages and farms, belonging to the Muslims. But their hearts have been seduced, for they observe how unlike them in ease and comfort are their brethren in the Muslim regions under their (Muslim) governors. This is one of the misfortunes afflicting the Muslims. The Muslim community bewails the injustice of a landlord of its own faith, and applauds the conduct of its opponents and enemy, the Frankish landlord, and must turn to God. There is comfort and consolation enough for us in the exalted book: “It is nothing but a trial; thou makest to err with it whom thou pleasest, and guidest whom thou pleasest” (Qur’an 7:155).[141](#)

Ibn Jubayr makes a rather striking observation—so striking in fact that if it were written by a Christian it would be dismissed as triumphalistic propaganda: Muslims lived very comfortably under the Christian Crusaders (the Franks) who occupied the land. They retained total possession of their property and enjoyed religious freedom. Muslims who lived in Muslim-occupied territories, however, were treated less well. To Ibn Jubayr, the greater charity and justice shown to Muslims by Christians than by Muslims themselves was a threat, a temptation, a seduction, a trial sent by Allah.

One wonders why Ibn Jubayr viewed Christian charity as a temptation? Was it because Christian charity might eventually lead Muslims to stop viewing Christians as their enemies and inferiors, and to start viewing them as equals? In the last part, we saw how Julian the Apostate similarly regarded Christian charity as a threat and a seduction, only he attempted to replicate it in paganism (see chapter sixteen). Ibn Jubayr’s reaction is quite different. His solution is not to call Muslim landowners to greater justice, but to label Christian benevolence as a seduction, a trial of faith that Muslims must resist.

## TESTIMONY

The (Muslim) people of this island [Palermo] suffer, amongst other tribulations, one that is very sore. Should a man show anger to his son or his wife, or a woman to her daughter, the one who is the object of displeasure may perversely throw himself into a church, and there be baptized and turn Christian. Then there will be for the father no way to approaching his son, or the mother her daughter. Conceive now the state of one so afflicted in his family or even in his son. The dread of their falling to this temptation would alone shorten his life. The Muslims of Sicily therefore are most watchful of the management of their family, and their children, in case this should happen. The most clear-sighted of them fear that it shall chance to them all as it did in earlier times to the Muslim inhabitants of Crete. There a Christian despotism so long visited them with one (painful) circumstance after the other that they were all constrained to turn Christian, only those escaping whom God so decreed. But the word of chastisement shall fall upon these infidels. God's will shall prevail: there is indeed no God but he.<sup>142</sup>

This passage was written in March 1185. It appears that one of the afflictions suffered by Muslims in Sicily was that wives or children who suffered abuse from their husbands and fathers could go to a church for sanctuary and protection. If they decided to convert to Christianity, the father would have “no way to approaching his son, or the mother her daughter.” Ibn Jubayr believed that the same clemency led Muslims in Crete to become Christian.<sup>143</sup>

<sup>138</sup> *The Travels of Ibn Jubayr*, trans. Roland Broadhurst (Hicksville New York: IB Publisher, Inc., 2013), 313.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid*, 316.

<sup>140</sup> Arabic with English translation found here: [http://www.qtafsir.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=2566&Itemid=64](http://www.qtafsir.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2566&Itemid=64).

<sup>141</sup> *The Travels of Ibn Jubayr*, 316–317.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 359–360.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 359.

## Rabbi Efraim Ben Jacob of Bonn (1132–1200) Rabbi and Historian

One horrible consequence of the Crusades was the persecution of Jewish communities in Europe by bands of Crusaders *en route* to the East. No one should attempt to sweep this under the rug. But it is also unjust for non-Catholics and nonbelievers to accuse the Church herself of complicity in these shameful episodes. It's true that some of these bands of persecutors were led by men of the cloth, but it is also true that they did so against the directions of their superiors, bishops, and even the popes. As Hugo of Flavigny (1064–1114) observed,

It certainly seems amazing that on a single day in many different places, moved in unison by a violent inspiration, such massacres should have taken place, despite their widespread disapproval and their condemnation as contrary to religion. But we know that they could not have been avoided since they occurred in the face of excommunication imposed by numerous clergymen, and of the threat of punishment on the part of many princes.<sup>144</sup>

It's important not to think of the Crusaders in terms of a modern military force. The Crusades were not nearly as well-organized as we tend to think. They were essentially a large, loosely-knit group of people meandering their way eastward toward the Holy Land, all of them bound by oath to hear Mass in the Holy Sepulcher. The Crusaders came from several different classes of society, from nobles and to the thankfully now-extinct warrior class (a group of semi-converted barbarians who made their living raiding and pillaging their neighbors). Needless to say, the warrior class didn't comprise the brightest or best-catechized people in the world. By modern standards, the Crusades were devoid of a well-organized command and control structure, which for a project of that size at that point in history would most likely have been impossible.

Abuses did occur despite the best efforts of the Church. Some Jewish communities suffered at the hands of some Crusaders, not only in the First Crusade (1096–1099), but also in the Second Crusade (1145–1149). Our



hostile witness was a member of one of those communities during the Second Crusade.

Rabbi Efraim ben Jacob of Bonn was only thirteen when a band of anti-Semitic Crusaders entered Wolkenberg, Germany, in September 1146. He witnessed horrible brutality, forced baptisms, and the virtuous acts of some Jews who preferred death to violating their consciences. In his book, *Sefer Zekhirah* (Book of Remembrance) (1146) he recorded the persecution of a wicked priest named Radulf and the efforts made by St. Bernard of Clairvaux to restrain him.

### CATHOLIC OPPOSITION TO ATROCITIES

#### TESTIMONY

For Radulf was wicked and he treacherously persecuted the Jews. Radulf, the priest of idolatry, arose against the nation of God to destroy, slay, and annihilate them just as wicked Haman had attempted to do. He set forth from France and traveled across the entire land of Germany—may God spare the Jewish community there, amen!—to seek out and to contaminate the Christians with the horizontal-vertical sign. He went along barking and was named “barker,” summoning all in the name of Christ to go to Jerusalem to war against Ishmael. Wherever he went, he spoke evil of the Jews of the land and incited the snake and the gods against us, saying: “Avenge the crucified one upon his enemies who stand before you; then go to war against the Ishmaelites.”

Upon hearing this, our hearts melted and our spirit failed us, because of the fury of the oppressor who intended to destroy us. We cried out to our God, saying: “Alas, Lord, God, not even fifty years, the number of years of a jubilee, have passed since our blood was shed in witness to the oneness of your revered name on the day of the great slaughter. Will you forsake us eternally, O Lord? Will you extend your anger to all generations? Do not permit this suffering to recur.”

The Lord hears our outcry, and he turned to us and had mercy upon us. In his great mercy and grace, he sent a decent priest, one honored and respected by all the clergy in France, named Abbé Bernard, of Clairvaux in France, to deal with this evil person. Bernard, too, spoke raucously, as is their manner; and this is what he said to them: “It is

good that you go against the Ishmaelites [Muslims]. But whosoever touches a Jew to take his life, is like one who harms Jesus himself. My disciple Radulf, who has spoken about annihilating the Jews, has spoken in error, for the book of Psalms it is written of them: “Slay them not, lest my people forget.” When our enemies heard his words, many of them ceased plotting to kill us. Were it not for the mercy of our creator in sending the aforementioned abbot [Bernard] and his later letters, no remnant or vestige would have remained of Israel. Blessed be the redeemer and savior, blessed be his name.[145](#)

Radulf the Barker was a Cistercian priest who led a band of Crusaders against the Jews. St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) rebuked this renegade priest and his followers. Rabbi Efraim’s passage shows St. Bernard’s thoughts on the matter, echoing the teaching of Jesus in Mathew 25:34–46 where caring for “the least ones” is to care for Jesus. Bernard takes this idea and applies it to the present situation: “But whosoever touches a Jew to take his life, is like one who harms Jesus himself.” He also quoted Psalm 59:11[12] against Radulf, but Efraim omits Bernard’s explanation of it.

#### HOSTILE WITNESS

Rabbi Efraim’s passage speaks to something that is absent in the popular imagination; namely, that these anti-Semitic acts happened in spite of the best efforts of the Church and its hierarchy to prevent them. When these misdirected Crusaders approached Jewish communities with ill intent, it was the Catholic bishops, like those in Mainz, Speyer, and Worms, who attempted to protect the Jews, sometimes even by hiding them in their residences, and at risk to their own lives. In this instance, our hostile witness recounts how St. Bernard of Clairvaux intervened and reprovved these wayward Crusaders. These atrocities should not go unnoticed; at the same time, religion should not be branded as their cause. If anything, it was organized religion (that is, the Church) that stood against these renegades, rather than urging them on.

In 1199, Pope Innocent III issued his *Constitution on the Jews*, which also cited the same passage from the Psalms that St. Bernard cited in Rabbi Efraim’s account. This document illustrates that St. Bernard’s rebuke of the

anti-Semitic cleric was clearly in line with the mind of the Church. Pope Innocent III's *Constitution* reads,

Although in many ways the disbelief of the Jews must be reproved, since nevertheless through them our own Faith is truly proved, they must not be oppressed grievously by the faithful as the prophet says: "Do not slay them, lest these be forgetful of thy law" [Ps. 58 (59):12], as if he were saying more openly: "Do not wipe out the Jews completely, lest perhaps Christians might be able to forget thy law, which the former, although not understanding it, present in their books to those who do understand it."

Just as, therefore there ought not to be license for the Jews to presume to go beyond what is permitted them by law in their synagogues, so in those which have been conceded to them, they ought to suffer no prejudice. These men . . . since they beseech the help of our defense, we, out of the meekness proper to Christian piety, and keeping in the footprints of our predecessors of happy memory, the Roman Pontiffs Calixtus, Eugene, Alexander, Clement, and Celestine, admit their petition, and we grant them the buckler of our protection.

For we make the law that no Christian compel them, unwilling or refusing, by violence to come to baptism. But if any one of them should spontaneously, and for the sake of faith, fly to the Christians, once his choice has become evident, let him be made a Christian without any calumny. Indeed, he is not considered to possess the true faith of the Christianity who is recognized to have come to Christian baptism, not spontaneously, but unwillingly.

Too, no Christian ought to presume, apart from the juridical sentence of the territorial power, wickedly to injure their persons, or with violence to take away their property, or to change the good customs which they have had until now in whatever region they inhabit.

Besides, in the celebration of their own festivals, no one ought to disturb them in any way, with clubs or stones, nor ought any one try to require from them or to extort from them services they do not owe, except for those they have been accustomed from times past to perform.

In addition to these, we decree, blocking the wickedness and avarice of evil men, that no one ought to dare to mutilate or diminish a Jewish cemetery, nor, in order to get money, to exhume bodies once they have been buried.

If anyone, however, shall attempt, the tenor of this decree once known, to go against it—may this be far from happening!—let him be punished by the vengeance of excommunication, unless he correct his presumption by making equivalent satisfaction.

We desire, however, that only those be fortified by the guard of this protection who shall have presumed no plotting for the subversion of the Christian faith.

Given at the Lateran, by the hand of Raynaldus, archbishop of Acerenza, acting for the chancellor, on the seventeenth day before the Kalends of October, in the second indiction, and the 1199th year of the Incarnation of the Lord, and in the second year of the pontificate of the Lord Pope, Innocent III.<sup>146</sup>

Pope Innocent III's *Constitution* lays out the terms of toleration of Jews in Christian lands. It also provides a stark contrast with the terms and conditions laid out in the *Qur'an Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, quoted earlier, concerning the toleration of Christians in Muslim lands.

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<sup>144</sup> Salo W. Baron, *Social and Religious History of the Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957), 4:101.

<sup>145</sup> Shlomo Eidelberg, *The Jews and the Crusaders: The Hebrew Chronicles of the First and Second Crusades* (Jersey City: KTAV Publishing, 1996), 122. Used with permission.

146 Oliver J. Thatcher and Edgar Holmes McNeal, eds., *A Source Book for Medieval History* (New York: Scribners, 1905), 212–213.

## Part VI

# The Inquisition

The myth of the Inquisition is the crowning achievement of centuries of no-popery propaganda. It has become so well-ingrained in the Western conscience that it has taken on a life of its own. The very name has become a pejorative describing any act of intolerance or arbitrary use of authority. The myth is propounded in school textbooks, political rhetoric, and even in comedy.

Whereas practically everyone knows the myth of the Inquisition, very few people actually know what the real thing was—and was *not*. Indeed, most people don't know that "*the* Inquisition" never existed. There were several inquisitions that operated in different places and times for different reasons. The only reason why people only know of "*the* Inquisition" is because no-popery history has singled out the Spanish Inquisition as its victim.

This part will focus on the inquisitions in southern France and in Spain. It is beyond the scope of this book to include all the details involved in these institutions, but the hostile witnesses cited may provide a corrective to the myriad misunderstandings that surround these institutions.

Since "*the* Inquisition" is a reference to the inquisitional tribunals in Spain (1478–1834), most of the material in this part will be devoted to the Spanish Inquisition. The myth depicts the Spanish Inquisition as an omnipresent, totalitarian, religious-political entity that controlled every aspect of Spanish society. Such was not the case. The influence of the Inquisition was limited to urban areas, which in an agrarian culture meant that it influenced less than a quarter of Spain's population. Even within urban areas the Inquisition's influence was limited, since these areas were filled with other groups with competing interests (the aristocracy, nobility, etc.), making the inquisitional courts a lightning rod for criticism on all fronts. Clergy, kings, popes, ordinary citizens, and even some of the inquisitors themselves were critical of how the Inquisition ran. Nobody completely liked the Spanish Inquisition.

When these criticisms are combined with the complexities of the Spanish Inquisition, they become perfect modeling clay for anti-Catholic and anti-

religious polemicists to form a myth. When studied in a vacuum and singled out from similar institutions in medieval society, the Spanish Inquisition can easily be made to appear to be a distinctly Spanish and Catholic thing. All that needs to be done is to make its abuses appear to be the norm, horribly inflate the numbers of people executed, and you have all the components needed to make a smashing film!

Here is where hostile witnesses may be of service. Like all the witnesses so far examined, the purpose of their testimony is not to give an exhaustive treatment of a given topic, but only to open the possibility that we may not know as much about the subject as our popular history has led us to believe.

Since nobody really liked the Inquisition, what counts as a “hostile witness” will be a bit different here than in previous parts. It includes a Protestant historian with a distinctly anti-Catholic bias, a former inquisitor who had an ax to grind against his previous employer, a violently anti-Catholic French polemicist, and a Catholic king perturbed by papal interventions. Together, they may not debunk all the different facets of the Inquisition myth, but they whet the appetite for further study of the subject.

## Henry Charles Lea (1823–1909) Protestant Historian

Henry Lea was not a witness to the Inquisition; rather, he was an American historian who wrote a seminal three-volume work titled *A History of the Inquisition in the Middle Ages*. Lea's work represented a step forward in modern research on the Inquisition in that he relied on primary source material. Despite his statements to the contrary, his work was not devoid of polemics, and his decided anti-Catholic bias fed into many stereotypes and errors that have contributed to the Inquisition myth.

Our quote from Lea concerns what is known as the Albigensian Crusade (1209–1229) in Languedoc, in the south of France. The Inquisition was set up to help identify a very slippery radical group known as the Albigensians or the Cathari.

### HERESY AND SEDITION

#### TESTIMONY

Such was the faith whose rapid spread throughout the south of Europe filled the Church with well-grounded dismay; and however much we may see the means used for its suppression and commiserate those who suffered for conscience's sake, we cannot but admit that the cause of orthodoxy was in this case the cause of progress and civilization. Had Catharism become dominant, or even had it been allowed to exist on equal terms, its influence could not have failed to prove disastrous. Its asceticism with regard to commerce between the sexes, and as this enforced, could only have led to the extinction of the race, and as this involves a contradiction of nature, it would have probably resulted in lawless concubinage and the destruction of the institution of the family, rather than in the disappearance of the human race and the return of exiled souls of their Creator, which was the *summum bonum* of the true Catharan. Its condemnation of the visible universe and of matter in general as the work of Satan rendered sinful all striving after material improvement, and the conscientious belief in such a creed could only lead man back,



in time, to his original condition of savagism. It was not only a revolt against the Church, but a renunciation of man's dominion over nature. As such it was doomed from the start, and our only wonder must be that it maintained itself so long and so stubbornly even against a Church which had earned so much of popular detestation.<sup>147</sup>

#### HOSTILE WITNESS

Commenting on the inquisitions of southern France (Toulouse, Albi, et al.), Lea's repugnance at the methods of the Inquisition didn't prevent him from admitting that "the cause of orthodoxy was in this case the cause of progress and civilization." Had Albigensianism taken root in Europe, the consequences would have been both predictable and devastating. The subversive nature of their beliefs and practices could not be allowed to flourish in medieval France.

Some Protestant groups, such as the Baptist Secessionists, have tried to repackaging the Albigensians as a proto-Protestant Christian sect that was crushed by the pope and his evil minions.<sup>148</sup> However, the Albigensians were not Christian by any stretch of the imagination. They were dualists who believed in two gods or "principles." The good god or principle was pure spirit, and the evil god or principle was material. Everything that was spiritual was good and everything physical or material was evil. The Albigensians' radical anti-material bent led them to observe strict abstinence both inside and outside of marriage, since the carnal act was physical and it brought forth children whose spiritual souls were trapped in physical bodies. They also forbade taking oaths, which was an integral part of feudal society. Since governments were part of the material world, they were thought to be under the dominion of the evil god. Therefore, the Albigensians considered themselves exempt from obeying King Philip II, which essentially placed them in rebellion against the crown.

The ends never justify the means, and criticisms can legitimately be made concerning the ways in which Albigensianism was suppressed. However, Lea admits something that the average myth-holder does not. Albigensianism, if allowed to grow unchecked, would have constituted a threat to the state and to civilization as a whole.

<sup>147</sup> Henry Charles Lea, *A History of the Inquisition* (New York: MacMillan, 1906), 1:1064.

<sup>148</sup> James Milton Carroll, *The Trail of Blood: Following the Christians Down Through the Centuries* —or, *The History of Baptist Churches from the Time of Christ, their Founder, to the Present Day*

(Bearing Precious Seed, 1931).

## Juan Antonio Llorente (1756–1823)

Juan Antonio Llorente was a priest and a general secretary of the Inquisition in Madrid, Spain. Llorente's tenure as general secretary was abruptly cut short when he ran afoul of the court. He was fined and dismissed from his position. Llorente's fortunes changed, however, when Napoleon Bonaparte invaded Spain in 1808. He joined the Bonaparte regime and was put in charge of the suppression of the monastic orders. The following year the new king abolished the offices of the Inquisition, and Llorente was granted access to the Inquisition's archives so that he might write a history of the institution. However, Llorente's fortunes changed once again when Napoleon's conquest of Spain failed. He was forced to flee to Paris where he completed *The History of the Inquisition of Spain, from the Time of Its Establishment to the Reign of Ferdinand VII* in 1817–1818.

Llorente's work was the first account of the Spanish Inquisition based on internal documents. Its value is marred, however, by the author's bitter anti-clerical bias and his grossly exaggerated statistics, which later served as fodder for those who wished to perpetuate the anti-Catholic myth of the Inquisition.

### PRISONS OF THE INQUISITION

#### TESTIMONY

When the qualification has been made, the procurator-fiscal demands that the denounced person shall be removed to the *secret prisons* of the *holy office*. The tribunal has three sorts of prisons; public, intermediate, and secret. The first are those where persons are imprisoned, who are not guilty of heresy, but of some crime which the Inquisition has the privilege of punishing: the second are destined for those servants of the holy office who have committed some crime in the exercise of their functions, without incurring suspicion of heresy. Those who are detained in these prisons are permitted to communicate with others, unless they are condemned to solitary confinement. The secret prisons are those where all heretics, or persons suspected of

heresy, are confined; they can only communicate with the judges of the tribunal.

These prisons are not, as they have been represented, damp, dirty, and unhealthy; they are vaulted chambers, well lighted, not damp, and large enough for a person to take some exercise in. The real horrors of the prisons are, that no one can enter them without becoming infamous in the public opinion; and the solitude and the darkness to which the prisoner is condemned of fifteen hours in the day during the winter, as he is not allowed light before the hour of seven in the morning, or after four in the evening. Some authors have stated, that the prisoners were chained; these means are only employed on extraordinary occasions, and to prevent them from destroying themselves.[149](#)

#### HOSTILE WITNESS

Llorente had no lack of antipathy toward the Inquisition. Nevertheless, he felt compelled occasionally to correct some of the myths that surrounded the institution. Here Llorente takes aim at the myths concerning the Inquisition's prisons. According to the popular imagination, the Inquisition's prisons were an inhuman nightmare, a dark, wet, torturous place where prisoners were chained together behind iron bars. The truth, in Llorente's description, however, was quite different. Unlike the prisons typical in Europe at the time, the prisons of the Spanish Inquisition were comparatively spacious, with room for the prisoners to move about freely. Prisoners were not chained, except in extraordinary circumstances where it was feared that the prisoner might harm himself or attempt suicide. According to Llorente, the worst part of the Inquisition's prisons weren't their conditions, but the stigma of being sent to one. This is a far cry from the barbaric mental picture most people have about the Inquisition's prison cells.

#### TORTURE INFREQUENT

#### TESTIMONY

It is true, that it is so long since torture has been inflicted by inquisitors, that the custom may be looked upon as abolished, and the fiscal only makes the demand in conformity to the example of his processors, yet it is equally cruel to make the prisoners fear it.[150](#)

Roman law had permitted the use of torture during interrogations. The practice continued until it was banned by Pope Nicholas I in 866. In the thirteenth century, there was a revival of Roman law in civil courts, and the repeated application of torture was once again allowed in civil courts. The Inquisition, being a judicial body, eventually adopted the standard norms and procedures of civil law, which also included the use of torture during its investigations.

The myth of the Inquisition makes it seem as if these courts did nothing but torture people. But even early on, when torture was permitted, it was not always used. Torture was sometimes threatened, but in order to apply it the Inquisition had to observe several restrictions. The first was that torture could only be used for crimes involving heresy. Since a vast majority of the cases that came before the Inquisition involved other matters, torture was threatened or applied relatively infrequently. If it was a heresy case, the Inquisition needed to have sufficient evidence to show that the person was lying and that all other means of eliciting a confession had been exhausted. Torture was never to be used as punishment. Its application could not endanger life or limb. When it was applied, it would only be once, and the application generally lasted no more than fifteen minutes. Compared to its civil counterparts, the Inquisition showed remarkable restraint, since, at that time, it was the *only* criminal court in Europe to put limitations on torture.<sup>[151](#)</sup>

These restrictions made the application of torture relatively rare. The best estimates suggest that only two percent or less of cases before the Inquisition actually involved torture. Since the government was most concerned with Muslims who pretended to convert to Catholicism in order to retain their positions within society and government, it is not surprising to find that the percentages are higher in areas where these “secret converts” were most prevalent.<sup>[152](#)</sup> When viewed as a whole, however, torture still remained relatively rare. By 1537, almost every application of torture against the *Moriscos* had been abolished, and Pope Pius VII in 1816 abolished its use altogether.<sup>[153](#)</sup>

#### HOSTILE WITNESS

The Spanish Inquisition was a complex enterprise. General statements about it often fail when they are applied to specific regions and times. To

the popular mind, the Inquisition's main mode of operation was torture and executions. Our hostile witness, an ex-inquisitor, tells us that such was not the case. This is not to say that there weren't abuses; there certainly were. These abuses, however, were exceptions. As a rule, the Inquisition tribunals looked at torture as something unnecessary, even embarrassing. By Llorente's day, it was a thing of the past. The worst charge that Llorente could make against the Inquisition was that it made prisoners fear the possibility of torture. Even in Llorente's day, the Inquisition had long before recognized that a free confession could not be coerced, and the practice was abandoned.

### EXAGGERATED NUMBERS OF DEATHS

#### TESTIMONY

Number of persons who were condemned and perished in the flames—31,912. Effigies burnt—17,659. Condemned to severe penances—291,450.<sup>154</sup>

Henry Lea, our previous hostile witness, says of Llorente's figures, "There is no question that the number of these has been greatly exaggerated in popular belief, an exaggeration to which Llorente has largely contributed by his absurd method of computation."<sup>155</sup> Llorente's work had been an early major source of information about the Inquisition until it was replaced with better studies. Unfortunately, people took Llorente's inflated numbers seriously and used them to create the Inquisition myth. Today, no scholar takes his numbers seriously.

#### HOSTILE WITNESS

The strange thing is that Llorente's inflated numbers appear paltry when compared to the numbers concocted by more recent anti-Catholic polemicists. David Hunt's book *The Woman Rides the Beast*, for example, says, "In his History of the Inquisition, Canon Llorente, who was the Secretary to the Inquisition in Madrid from 1790–92 and had access to the archives of all the tribunals, estimated that in Spain alone the number of condemned exceeded 3 million, with about 300,000 burned at the stake."<sup>156</sup> Hunt not only misquoted Llorente, but had he checked the most common estimates of the entire population of Spain during the 1700s, he would have found that it had only somewhere between seven to nine

million people. Hunt's figures, if they were correct, would have made the Spanish Inquisition condemn between one-third to just under one-half of the entire Spanish population! Putting Hunt's numbers aside, Llorente said that 31,912 "were condemned and perished in the flames." Even here Llorente's figures are greatly exaggerated. Modern scholars, such as Henry Kamen, put the total number of executions *in persona* (that is, who actually died) at no more than 2,000 people in the whole of Spain up until 1530.<sup>157</sup>

The myth of the Spanish Inquisition attempts to make the institution look like a singular example of brutality and the unique fruit of Catholicism. It does this by looking at the Inquisition in isolation, ignoring how other courts worked at the time. When it is viewed alongside similar tribunals throughout Europe at that time, the Inquisition fares quite well, as the historian Edward Peters notes,

The Spanish Inquisition, in spite of wildly inflated estimates of the numbers of its victims, acted with considerable restraint in inflicting the death penalty, far more restraint than was demonstrated in secular tribunals elsewhere in Europe that dealt with the same kinds of offenses. The best estimate is that around 3,000 death sentences were carried out in Spain by inquisitorial verdict between 1550 and 1800, a far smaller number than that in comparable secular courts.<sup>158</sup>

Although no one completely liked the Spanish Inquisition, it was nevertheless far superior to its civil counterparts both in terms of its fairness and its restraint. When was the last time you read that in a school textbook?

<sup>149</sup> Juan A. Llorente, *The History of the Inquisition of Spain, from the Time of its Establishment to the Reign of Ferdinand VII* (London: G. B. Whittaker, 1826), 62.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>151</sup> "The Holy See and the Spanish Inquisition," in *The Dublin Review* (July–October, 1867), 198.

<sup>152</sup> Henry Kamen, *The Spanish Inquisition: A Historical Revision* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 239.

<sup>153</sup> *Moriscos* is Spanish for the Moors (i.e., Muslims).

<sup>154</sup> Henry Charles Lea, *A History of the Inquisition*, 4:583.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.* 517.

<sup>156</sup> Dave Hunt, *A Woman Rides the Beast: The Roman Catholic Church and the Last Days* (Harvest House Publishers, 1994), 79, also 242.

<sup>157</sup> Henry Kamen, *The Spanish Inquisition: A Historical Revision*, 60.

<sup>158</sup> Edward Peters, *Inquisition* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 87.

## King Ferdinand II of Aragon (1452–1516) King of Sicily and Aragon

King Ferdinand and his wife Isabelle are best known in American history books as the rulers who sent Christopher Columbus on the ocean voyage that led to the discovery of the Americas. Ferdinand was also instrumental in establishing the Spanish Inquisition.

It is almost impossible for us today to fathom the historical context that surrounded King Ferdinand's actions. Spain had been under Islamic occupation for almost *800 years* (711–1492). You read that correctly: nearly eight centuries. The reconquest of Spain was a long and bitter struggle that was finally accomplished by King Ferdinand.

When Pope Sixtus IV (1414–1484) permitted Catholic sovereigns to establish inquisition tribunals in their territories, Spain was slow to act. They apparently didn't see any pressing need for such courts. The first Spanish tribunals didn't begin until 1480, a few years after Pope Sixtus's decree. The tribunals soon discovered that some Muslims only pretended to convert to Christianity in order to retain their place in Spanish society, including their positions in the government. These Muslim pseudo-converts must have appeared to the crown to be a kind of Islamic "fifth column" that threatened Catholic Spain's hard-won sovereignty. The king, therefore, wanted the Inquisition to work unhampered so that it could ferret out these pretend converts. In the quotation below, our hostile witness warns the pope not to interfere with the Inquisition in Spain.

### CONTROL OF TRIBUNALS

#### TESTIMONY

Things have been told me, Holy Father, which, if true, would seem to merit the greatest astonishment. . . . To these rumors, however, we have given no credence because they seem to be things which would in no way have been conceded by Your Holiness who has a duty to the Inquisition. But if by chance concessions have been made through the persistent and cunning persuasion of the *conversos*, I intend never to let them take effect. Take care therefore not to let the matter go further,



and to revoke any concessions and entrust us with the care of this question.<sup>159</sup>

It didn't take long before complaints about inquisitions reached the pope. On January 29, 1482, Pope Sixtus IV issued a brief accusing the Spanish Inquisition of unjust imprisonment, cruel tortures, and unjust dispossession of property. They were admonished to act only in concert with the bishops, and were threatened with disposition if these abuses weren't corrected.

King Ferdinand, outraged by the pope's brief, wrote a scathing letter to Sixtus accusing him of being bribed by the pseudo-converts. Ferdinand stated in no uncertain terms that he would block any of the pope's "concessions" from taking place, and later in the same letter he even threatened to remove his military support from Italy, leaving it vulnerable to a possible Turkish invasion. The pope had no choice but to back down. As a result, the crown was effectively in the driver's seat, and all subsequent papal complaints and protests fell on deaf ears.

As the Inquisition historian Kamen notes, "The way lay completely open to Ferdinand. Papal cooperation was definitively secured by the bull of October 14, 1483, which appointed Torquemada as inquisitor general of Aragon, Valencia, and Catalonia, thus uniting the Inquisitions of the Spanish crown under a single head. The new tribunal came directly under the control of the crown and was the only institution whose authority over heresy ran in all the territories of Spain, replacing the powers formerly exercised in the matter by bishops."<sup>160</sup>

#### HOSTILE WITNESS

Ferdinand's letter to Pope Sixtus IV reveals that the Spanish Inquisition was not the hand-puppet of the pope. In fact, the pope was its chief critic. The new tribunal, under Torquemada, came directly under the control of the crown. The myth of the Inquisition omits this very important point. Why?

Spain had been a minor power in European politics up until Columbus's discovery of America. Endowed with great wealth from the Americas, Spain almost overnight became a European superpower and a threat to other nations. As a result, the myth of the Spanish Inquisition became part and parcel of anti-Spanish propaganda of the time. It became particularly effective after the English Reformation in the mid-sixteenth century, since it married two of Protestant England's greatest enemies, Spain and

Catholicism. When Spain ceased to be a military and political threat, the only remaining purpose for the myth was anti-Catholicism. The Spanish Inquisition became “The Inquisition.” All the other inquisitional tribunals outside of Spain passed out of the public’s mind, as did the Islamic occupation of Spain, the centuries-long re-conquest, and the Spanish crown’s control over these tribunals. Only the Church was left to blame. Ferdinand’s letter reminds us that there is more to the Spanish Inquisition than most people think.

<sup>159</sup> Quoted in Kamen, 49–50.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 58–59.

François-Marie Arouet  
(Voltaire) (1694–1778) Author, Historian, and  
Philosopher

Voltaire is perhaps the best known and most influential French Enlightenment writer. Raised a Catholic, he turned against the Faith and became a deist.<sup>161</sup> Voltaire championed religious freedom, but not for Catholics. He referred to Catholicism as the “infamous superstition” and recommended its extirpation.<sup>162</sup> The National Assembly of France declared him to be a forerunner of the French Revolution and had his remains interred in the Pantheon in Paris. Few people could be more hostile to the Church than Voltaire was, yet even he made a surprising admission about Spain, and by extension about the fruits of the Inquisition.

SPANISH TOLERANCE

TESTIMONY

It was said then that pride, devotion, love, and idleness composed the character of the Spanish nation; but at the same time there were none of those bloody revolutions, conspiracies, and cruel punishments which were so frequent in the other courts of Europe. Neither the Duke of Lerma nor Count Olivarez shed the blood of their enemies on the scaffold; nor did they fall, as in England, by the hand of the executioner.<sup>163</sup>

HOSTILE WITNESS

No one used the Inquisition to his advantage better than Voltaire. Yet even Voltaire, in this surprising synopsis, does something that those who pass on the myth of the Inquisition would never do. He compared Spanish polity to its neighbors. Despite his grave misgivings about Catholic Spain, Voltaire notes that it did not suffer from the same bloody uprisings and social-political instability that affected the rest of Europe. Strangely enough, he never says why. Joseph de Maistre and others believe that Voltaire understood that despite all its wrongdoings the Inquisition provided the stability needed to avoid the atrocities and bloodbaths that occurred in countries without such tribunals.<sup>164</sup>

In an ironic twist, the very atrocities Voltaire compliments Catholic Spain for avoiding soon came to his own beloved France, where atheists and his fellow deists dealt out violence and death to Christians and political dissenters. It is estimated that during the forty-one days of the Reign of Terror (September 6, 1793–July 28, 1794) over 15,000 people were executed by the guillotine alone.<sup>165</sup> The two and a half centuries of trials in all of the tribunals in the whole of Spain never exceeded even a quarter of that number.

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<sup>161</sup> A deist is one who affirms the existence of a supreme being, but not one who intervenes in his Creation or communicates with man via supernatural revelation.

<sup>162</sup> Voltaire, *Letter to Frederick II of Prussia*, January 5, 1767.

<sup>163</sup> As quoted in *Ancient and Modern History*, eds. Tobias George Smollett et al. (London: E.R. DuMont, 1901), 15:225–26.

<sup>164</sup> Joseph De Maistre, *Letters on the Inquisition* (London: Keating, 1838), 58.

<sup>165</sup> *The Encyclopedia of Political Revolutions*, ed. Jack A. Goldstone (New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis, 1998), 184.

## Part VII

# The Protestant Reformation

Protestantism began in 1517 when an Augustinian monk named Martin Luther (1483–1546) nailed his Ninety-five Theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. Luther's initial difficulty with the Catholic Church concerned indulgences (remissions granted by the Church of the temporal punishment due to sins, gained by the penitent's performance of certain actions such as prayers, pilgrimages, and good works). As the controversy progressed, Luther took issue with other doctrines, until he eventually broke away from the Church. The two founding principles of his new Protestant faith were *sola scriptura* (the Bible alone) and *sola fide* ([justification by] faith alone).

Other Protestants, touting the same principles, almost immediately began to challenge Luther's theology. Chief among them was the Swiss Protestant Reformer Huldrych Zwingli (1484–1531), who disputed Luther's teaching on Christ's Real Presence in the Eucharist. Still others, such as the Anabaptists, rejected even more traditional doctrine and thus made a more radical break with historic Christianity. Later, Reformed Protestantism emerged with John Calvin (1504–1564), whose theology differed in various ways from that of Luther, Zwingli, and the Anabaptists.

While Protestantism was taking root in Europe, a different kind of Protestant Reformation commenced in England when King Henry VIII (1491–1547) broke from the Church because of the pope's refusal to annul his lawful marriage to Catherine of Aragon (1485–1536). Henry formed the Church of England, placing himself as its head.

In this part, Martin Luther and John Calvin will be our focus of interest.

## Martin Luther (1483–1546) Augustinian Monk and Father of the Protestant Reformation

Martin Luther is considered the founding father of the Protestant Reformation. His father wished for Luther to study law, but instead he entered the religious life to become an Augustinian monk. Luther excelled in biblical studies and earned a doctorate in theology. A turning point came when Luther became embroiled in a dispute over indulgences. In 1517, he nailed the Ninety-five Theses on the church door in Wittenberg. Luther then entered into a series of debates with Catholic theologians. It was in these debates that Luther's dispute with the Church widened. He denied the infallibility of the pope and Church councils, and proposed the Bible alone (*sola scriptura*) to be the Christian's highest authority. He also disputed other Catholic beliefs and practices, including the nature of sin, purgatory, and justification by faith and works. Unwilling to reconcile himself with the Church, he was excommunicated on January 3, 1521. Believing that he had rediscovered the true gospel of Christ, Luther set off on his own and became the Church's bitter enemy.

### THE DEUTEROCANON BECOMES APOCRYPHA

#### TESTIMONY

There is no proof of purgatory in any portion of Sacred Scripture, which can enter into the argument, and serve as a proof; for the book of Maccabees not being in the canon, is of weight with the faithful, but avails nothing with the obstinate.[166](#)

Apocrypha—that is, books which are not held equal to the holy Scripture, and yet are profitable and good to read.[167](#)

Two years after Luther posted the Ninety-five Theses, he entered into a series of debates in Leipzig, Germany, with the Catholic theologian Johann Maier von Eck (1486–1543). One of the subjects debated was purgatory. Eck cited a number of passages from Scripture in support of the full Catholic understanding of purgatory. Luther responded by contesting Eck's interpretation of each passage except one, 2 Maccabees 12:46 ("Thus he

made atonement for the dead that they might be absolved from their sin”). Although Luther had cited Maccabees as canonical Scripture in debates and discussions prior to his debate with Eck, he changed his position and rejected it (along with other deuterocanonical books) as non-canonical, while admitting that the book “is of weight with the faithful, but avails nothing with the obstinate.”

#### HOSTILE WITNESS

The book of 2 Maccabees is one of seven books that constitute the Deuterocanon. We have already seen other hostile witnesses speak to the issue of the Old Testament canon, including the chief priests, scribes, and elders using the book of Wisdom as an authoritative sacred text in the New Testament (see chapter five); and the exclusion by Rabbi Akiba, in the second Christian century, of both the Deuterocanon and the New Testament from the Rabbinic Bible (see chapter thirteen).

Most Protestants have been led to believe that the Deuterocanon, which they call apocrypha, was never in the Bible, and that it was the Catholic Church which added these books in order to support Catholic doctrine. Luther’s statement in his second Leipzig disputation speaks otherwise.

Luther did not reject 2 Maccabees because it had no authoritative weight. On the contrary, he admits that it is “of weight with the faithful”—that is, it has probative weight. His point, however, was that it didn’t have *enough* weight to persuade the obstinate (that is, himself or anyone who is firm in his position). By framing the discussion about canonicity as one of probative weight, Luther had effectively changed the idea of a scriptural canon from a definable objective standard to a nebulous subjective one. For Luther, a book was canonical *only inasmuch as* it “preached Christ” (that is, proclaimed the gospel as Luther understood it). According to this view, the binary canonical/non-canonical is replaced with a spectrum of canonicity, so that one book is seen as being more canonical than another. Canonicity, therefore, is determined by how well a given scriptural book matches Luther’s *rule of faith*. Since 2 Maccabees did not preach Christ to Luther’s satisfaction, it did not have sufficient authority to be canonical and to be entered into debate.

Luther’s introduction to the “apocrypha” in his German translation (1545) is also telling. Since he believed the deuterocanonical books were

apocryphal, one would expect that he would have removed them from his Bible. He didn't. Instead, he gathered them into an appendix, with a short introductory warning that they are not to be held as equal with Scripture, yet are "profitable and good to read." Why not remove them? And why was it the general practice to include these books in Protestant Bibles all the way up to the 1830s?

It seems that the outright removal of these books would have been too obvious and radical a change. Therefore, they remained in Protestant Bibles, safely tucked away in an appendix, until the memory of their former place in Scripture had faded and they could be removed altogether.

Luther's demotion of the Deuterocanon and the imposition of his theology as the determiner of canonicity is a tacit admission that Protestant theology isn't biblical.

#### LOSS OF CHARITY

##### TESTIMONY

If one preaches faith and grace, then nobody wants to do works. If one stresses works, then nobody wants faith, and strange are those that keep the right middle road. Yes, it is probably difficult even for the devout Christian.

Because I confess for myself, and no doubt others also must confess, that I now have much more of a lack of such diligence and seriousness than I previously had, and am more careless than under the papacy, and now nowhere is seen such seriousness in the gospel as we had previously with the monks and priests, when there was much donating and building, and no one was so poor that he did not wish to give you something. But now there is not a city that would support a preacher, and nothing happens except vain robbing and stealing among the people, and let no one defend them. From where does such a shameful plague come? From the teaching (the crier says), that teaches that one should not build more trust in works. But it is the vexatious devil who falsely ascribes such pure, sound doctrine, to which his people of wickedness is at fault and who abuse such teaching; this is also from our old Adam, who always wants to go to the side on the wrong path, and think, that it is not a problem, if we did not do many of the same



good works: and become so lazy and careless and grow slower, until we lose even the juice and power of the faith.[168](#)

Luther preached the message of justification by faith alone (*sola fide*) rather than by “faith working through love” (Gal. 5:6); he believed his doctrine to be the gospel in its purity. But in this sermon he candidly remarks that there had been a noticeable drop in Christian love and good works by those who left the Church to follow his teaching.

#### HOSTILE WITNESS

The passage above is not meant to suggest that Protestants are devoid of Christian charity. There are plenty of examples where Protestants exceed Catholics in this respect. Rather, Luther (and apparently his opponents) perceived a precipitous drop in selfless giving among those who had left the Church. As Catholics, Luther notes, everyone would give to those in need regardless of their own poverty. As Protestants, he says, there is only “vain robbing and stealing.” As Catholics, the laity would donate and build up the Church, whereas among Protestants “there is not a city that would support a preacher.”

What caused this loss of Christian charity? And how it is that while Luther and his followers were members of the Catholic Church—whose visible head, the pope, Luther later declared to be the Antichrist—they produced an abundance of love and charitable works, whereas after leaving the Church for the “pure gospel” they became selfish? Although Luther’s opponents would say it was caused by his doctrine of *sola fide*, Luther himself blames the devil for abusing his teaching, and also the “old Adam” (man’s fallen nature) for steering people down the wrong path. But even if true, these factors still don’t explain the loss in charity, since both of them (the devil and our fallen nature) were at work when people were Catholics, and yet charity abounded.

In previous parts, we saw how Christian charity played an important role in transforming the pagan world, despite being mocked, imitated, and castigated by various hostile witnesses. Christian charity, the fruit of faith, binds all Christians together in unity, and it overflows to all, especially the poor. As the emperor Julian learned, it cannot be manufactured.

Something was lost when Luther and his followers left the Church. Their former Catholic lives of self-donation and “seriousness” about the gospel

became what Luther styled as “a plague” of spiritual sloth and selfishness. Although the causes he identified may have played some role in this change, one ought not to forget that the Protestant break from the unity of the Church was itself a sign of a decline in charity, since unity is an effect of charity.

## LOSS OF UNITY

### TESTIMONY

We believed, during the reign of the pope, that the spirits which make a noise and disturbance in the night, were those of the souls of men, who after death, return and wander about in expiation of their sins. This error, thank God, has been discovered by the gospel, and it is known at present, that they are not the souls of men, but nothing else than those malicious devils who used to deceive men by false answers. It is they that have brought so much idolatry into the world.

The devil seeing that this sort of disturbance could not last, has devised a new one; and begins to rage in his members, I mean in the ungodly, through whom he makes his way in all sorts of chimerical follies and extravagant doctrines. This won't have baptism, that denies the efficacy of the Lord's supper; a third, puts a world between this and the last judgment; others teach that Jesus Christ is not God; some say this, others that; and there are almost as many sects and beliefs as there are heads.

I must cite one instance, by way of exemplification, for I have plenty to do with these sort of spirits. There is not one of them that does think himself more learned than Luther; they all try to win their spurs against me; and would to heaven that they were all such as they think themselves, and that I were nothing! The one of whom I speak assured me, amongst other things, that he was sent to me by the God of heaven and earth, and talked most magnificently, but the clown peeped through all. At last, he ordered me to read the books of Moses. I asked for a sign in confirmation of this order, “It is,” said he, “written in the Gospel of St. John.” By this time I had heard enough, and I told him, to come again, for that we should not have time, just now, to read the books of Moses. . . . I have plenty to do in the course of the year with these poor people: the devil could not have found a better pretext

for tormenting me. As yet the world had been full of those clamorous spirits without bodies, who oppressed the souls of men; now they have bodies, and give themselves out for living angels. . . . When the pope reigned we heard nothing of these troubles. The strong one (the devil) was in peace in his fortress; but now that a stronger one than he is come, and prevails against him and drives him out, as the Gospel says, he storms and comes forth with noise and fury.<sup>169</sup>

Luther's break from the Church was based on his reading of Scripture. Soon other Protestants began to break from Luther himself based on *their* reading of Scripture. One such person was a slate mason from Antwerp named Eloy Pruystinck. Pruystinck traveled to Wittenberg hoping to gain Luther's approval of his biblical teaching. Unfortunately for the slater, his views were antinomian (the belief that justification by faith alone releases the Christian from any obligation to follow the moral law), which was contrary to Luther's teaching. So the reformer wrote to the Lutherans in Antwerp warning them of Pruystinck and his followers.

#### HOSTILE WITNESS

Luther believed that he had discovered the gospel in its purity, which he believed was taught in Scripture in a most plain and indisputable way. When the Church disapproved of certain aspects of this teaching as being contrary to traditional doctrine, Luther claimed that his conscience was bound to what he found in Scripture alone, and he broke from the Church. But his principle of *sola scriptura* was soon used against him, as other Protestants dissented from his teachings by appealing to Scripture alone. Eloy Pruystinck was just one of many such opponents who believed they had discovered an even purer gospel than Luther's. The result was, as Luther said, that "there are almost as many sects and beliefs as there are heads."

Whether Luther realized it or not, his words are almost identical to those made by St. Vincent of Lerins (d. ca. 445). Vincent wrote that in his day there were "as many interpretations [of Scripture] as there are interpreters." He explained: "For Novatian expounds it one way, Sabellius another, Donatus another, Arius, Eunomius, Macedonius, another, Photinus, Apollinaris, Priscillian, another, Iovinian, Pelagius, Celestius, another, lastly, Nestorius another."<sup>170</sup> This sounds strikingly like Luther's

complaint: “This won’t have baptism, that denies the efficacy of the Lord’s supper; a third, puts a world between this and the last judgment; others teach that Jesus Christ is not God; some say this, others that.”

Luther and St. Vincent explained this disunity in different ways. Luther saw it as sown by a demonic spirit. Vincent attributed it to schismatics who interpreted Scripture independently of the Church. Vincent writes,

But here someone perhaps will ask, since the canon of Scripture is complete, and sufficient of itself for everything, and more than sufficient, what need is there to join with it the authority of the Church’s interpretation? For this reason—because, owing to the depth of holy Scripture, all do not accept it in one and the same sense, but one understands its words in one way, another in another; so that it seems to be capable of as many interpretations as there are interpreters. . . . Therefore, it is very necessary, on account of so great intricacies of such various error, that the rule for the right understanding of the prophets and apostles should be framed in accordance with the standard of ecclesiastical and Catholic interpretation. Moreover, in the Catholic Church itself, all possible care must be taken, that we hold that faith which has been believed everywhere, always, by all.<sup>171</sup>

According to St. Vincent, the rule that cuts through the various opinions of these heretical sects is that which is anchored in antiquity, ubiquity, and consensus as expounded authoritatively by the Church. Apart from the Church, there is division and doctrinal chaos.

Luther himself appears to recognize this when he states, “When the pope reigned we heard nothing of these troubles.” What Luther seems to have missed is that he had changed the interpretive method by which we understand Scripture. For Catholics, the proper interpretation is that which is anchored in the historic understanding of the Church, but for Protestants practicing *sola scriptura*, interpretation is ultimately left up the individual, producing “as many interpretations as there are interpreters.”

<sup>166</sup> As quoted in A. E. Breen’s *A General Introduction to Holy Scripture* (New York: John P. Smith, 1897), 516.

<sup>167</sup> Luther’s *German Bible* (1545), as quoted in Bruce M. Metzger’s *Introduction to the Apocrypha* (Oxford University Press, 1977), 183.

<sup>168</sup> Kritsche Gesamtausgabe., *D. Martin Luthers Werke*. (Weimar: Herman Bohlaus Nachfolger, 1883), 36, 416–477. English translation by Jim Anderson (unpublished).

169 As quoted in M. Michelet's *The Life of Luther Gathered from His Own Writings*, trans. G. H. Smith (London: Whittaker and Co., n.d.), 91–92.

170 St. Vincent of Lerins, *Commonitorium*, 2, 5–6. NPNF, 3:132.

171 Ibid., 2, 5. NPNF, 11:132.

## John Calvin (1509–1564) Founder of Reformed Protestantism (Calvinism)

John Calvin was born in Noyon, France. He initially wished to become a priest, but his studies were diverted to law. In autumn of 1533, Calvin left the Catholic Church for Protestantism. In March 1536, Calvin published his *Institutio Christianae Religionis* (Institutes of the Christian Religion), which laid out a systematic defense of Protestant teaching. (The *Institutes* were later revised and expanded, and widely translated.) Calvin's work in systematic theology produced the school of thought within Protestantism known, appropriately enough, as Calvinism.

### THE PRIMACY OF ROME

#### TESTIMONY

Let us now come to the primitive Church, that it may also appear that our opponents plume themselves on its support, not less falsely and unadvisedly than on the testimony of the word of God. When they lay it down as an axiom, that the unity of the Church cannot be maintained unless there be one supreme head on earth whom all the members should obey; and that, accordingly, our Lord gave the primacy to Peter, and thereafter, by right of succession, to the See of Rome, there to remain even to the end, they assert that this has always been observed from the beginning. But since they improperly wrest many passages, I would first premise, that I deny not that the early Christians uniformly give high honor to the Roman Church, and speak of it with reverence. This, I think, is owing chiefly to three causes.

The opinion which had prevailed (I know not how), that that Church was founded and constituted by the ministry of Peter, had great effect in procuring influence and authority. Hence, in the East, it was, as a mark of honor, designated the Apostolic See. Secondly, as the seat of empire was there, and it was for this reason to be presumed, that the most distinguished for learning, prudence, skill, and experience, were there more than elsewhere, account was justly taken of the

circumstance, lest the celebrity of the city, and the much more excellent gifts of God also, might seem to be despised. To these was added a third cause, that when the churches of the East, of Greece and of Africa, were kept in a constant turmoil by differences of opinion, the Church of Rome was calmer and less troubled. To this it was owing, that pious and holy bishops, when driven from their sees, often betook themselves to Rome as an asylum or haven. For as the people of the West are of a less acute and versatile turn of mind than those of Asia or Africa, so they are less desirous of innovations. It therefore added very great authority to the Roman Church, that in those dubious times it was not so much unsettled as others, and adhered more firmly to the doctrine once delivered, as shall immediately be better explained. For these three causes, I say, she was held in no ordinary estimation, and received many distinguished testimonies from ancient writers.<sup>172</sup>

The text comes from a section in the *Institutes* where Calvin addresses the claim of the primacy of the Roman Church. It's striking that he characterizes early Christians as *uniformly* giving the See of Rome high honor and speaking of it with reverence. What explains this uniformity? Calvin provides three possible reasons: (1) There was a prevailing "opinion" in the early Church "that [the Roman] Church was founded and constituted by the ministry of Peter," which opinion "had great effect in procuring influence and authority"; (2) Rome was the seat of the empire and its prestige became associated with the episcopal see in that city; and (3) unlike the Eastern churches, which were racked with heresies, Rome remained "less troubled" and became a safe haven for holy Christians in exile. Calvin adds a sub-point: Romans, like Westerners in general, were naturally disinclined toward innovations, and the resulting doctrinal stability "added very great authority to the Roman Church." But Calvin later concludes that such concessions don't justify the idea that the Church of Rome was "over" other churches.

#### HOSTILE WITNESS

Calvin may have conceded more than he would have wished. He begins by stating that the "early Christians uniformly" gave honor to Rome. But the reasons he provides for that are insufficient to explain it. His first reason is

that an "opinion" emerged in the early Church that the Roman See was "founded and constituted by the ministry of Peter." But how could a mere opinion have produced such uniformity? Calvin's second point doesn't fare much better: it is purely speculative and quite unlikely that the Roman See was honored because Rome was the capital of the empire. Before the Edict of Milan (313), which established toleration of Christianity within the Roman Empire, the empire's relationship to Christianity ranged from indifference to outright persecution. It is therefore doubtful that the early Christians would hold the capital in special esteem, and even less likely that it would confer any prestige on the Roman See. Calvin's third point concedes that the Roman Church was a center of orthodoxy during the years when the Eastern and African churches were embroiled in heresy. While this concession may explain why later Christians honored Rome, it fails to explain why "the early Christians uniformly give high honor" to Rome. Only one of Calvin's explanations could provide the basis for such an early and uniformed honor. The early Christians saw that papacy as being "founded and constituted by the ministry of Peter."

Our hostile witness, then, concedes that the early Christians uniformly honored and revered the See of Rome above all the other sees, and that it was known as a bastion of doctrinal stability.

## DIVISIONS WITHIN PROTESTANTISM

### TESTIMONY

But it greatly concerns us to cherish faithfully and constantly to the end the friendship which God has sanctified by the authority of his own name, seeing that herein is involved either great advantage or great loss even to the whole Church. For you see how the eyes of many are turned upon us, so that the wicked take occasion from our dissensions to speak evil, and the weak are only perplexed by our unintelligible disputations. Nor in truth, is it of little importance to prevent the suspicion of any difference having arisen between us from being handed down in any way to posterity; for it is worse than absurd that parties should be found disagreeing on the very principles, after we have been compelled to make our departure from the world. I know and confess, moreover, that we occupy widely different positions; still, because I am not ignorant of the place in his theatre to which God has



elevated me, there is no reason for my concealing that our friendship could not be interrupted without great injury to the Church. . . . And surely it is indicative of a marvellous and monstrous insensibility, that we so readily set at nought that sacred unanimity, by which we ought to be bringing back into the world the angels of heaven. Meanwhile, Satan is busy scattering here and there the seeds of discord, and our folly is made to supply much material. At length he has discovered fans of his own, for fanning into a flame the fires of discord.<sup>173</sup>

The occasion of Calvin's letter is a reply to the Lutheran theologian Philip Melanchthon (1497–1560) concerning their disagreements on communion and divine election.

#### HOSTILE WITNESS

From its inception, the Protestant Reformation began to splinter into competing sects. We have already seen Luther's comments about there being almost as many sects as there were heads. Calvin and Melanchthon also squabbled over a few serious differences. It's clear that Calvin sees these divisions as a scandal, as he says, "Nor in truth, is it of little importance to prevent the suspicion of any difference having arisen between us from being handed down in any way to posterity; for it is worse than absurd that parties should be found disagreeing on the very principles, after we have been compelled to make our departure from the world."

Like Luther, Calvin is blind to the fact that these divisions were caused by the very method of determining doctrine that gave birth to the Reformation, *sola scriptura* (the Bible alone). Instead, like Luther, he attributes these profound disagreements to the work of the devil. "Satan is busy scattering here and there the seeds of discord." But was Melanchthon's disagreement with Calvin really based on ill will or some demonic influence? Not at all. Melanchthon's warm letter to Calvin speaks otherwise.<sup>174</sup> The disagreement was really over two very different interpretations of Scripture.

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<sup>172</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1599), trans. Henry Beveridge (Raleigh: Hayes Baron Press, 2005), 997.

<sup>173</sup> *Letters of John Calvin: Compiled from the Original Manuscripts and Edited with Historical Notes*, ed. Jules Bonnet (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1858), 1, 376.

<sup>174</sup> Melancthon begins his letter saying, “Honored and dearest brother, I am anxious to communicate with you on matters of great moment, and this because I hold in the highest esteem your judgement, and the candour and purity of your soul”; and concludes, “I esteem you fortunate in your tranquillity, and pray God to remove our afflictions.” Letter to Calvin, October 1, 1552, as quoted in Henry Stebbing’s *The Life and Times of John Calvin, the Great Reformer*, trans. Paul Henry (London: Whittaker and Co., 1849), 2:113.

## Part VIII

# Lourdes, Fatima, and World War II

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries mark a period of great conflict, not only between nations but also between the Church and nonbelievers. This part will review the testimonies of hostile witnesses from three key events during this period: Lourdes, Fatima, and World War II.

In 1858, the Blessed Virgin Mary appeared to a peasant girl named Bernadette Soubirous (1844–1879) in Lourdes, France. Since then hundreds of healings have occurred in Lourdes, causing a great deal of contention between believers and skeptics. Our hostile witness was present at one of these miraculous healings, and his testimony reveals more about his skepticism than the miracle he observed.

World War I provides the backdrop to our next event, and it too concerns a Marian apparition. In 1917, the Blessed Virgin appeared to three Portuguese shepherd children, Lucia Santos (1905–2005) and her two cousins, Jacinta (1910–1920) and Francisco Marto (1908–1919), in Fatima, Portugal. During these visitations, Mary promised the children that a sign would be given for all to see on October 13, 1917. On that date somewhere between 30,000 and 100,000 people, believers and nonbelievers, gathered in Fatima to see whether a sign would occur. Our hostile witnesses were there and explain what they saw.

The Second World War is our third and final event for this part. Beginning in the 1960s, there has been an effort to brand Pope Pius XII and the Vatican as having been sympathetic to, even complicit in, the Nazi genocide of Jews, by not having openly condemned Hitler and his regime. This calumny gradually became a full-blown myth, one that is commonly identified today by the title of John Cornwell's bestseller, *Hitler's Pope*. But was Pius XII in fact silent about the Nazis? Even more important, did they really see the pope and the Catholic Church as their allies? Our hostile witnesses expose what the Nazis really thought about the pope and the Catholic Church during World War II.

## Émile Zola

(1840–1902), French Novelist—Miracles at Lourdes

Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code* wasn't the first historical fiction where the history was just as fictional as the story. Émile Zola beat Brown by over a hundred years. Zola was a famous French writer and avowed atheist whose novels and other works had won popular acclaim. In 1892, he decided to write a novel about the amazing cures said to be taking place in the waters of a spring in Lourdes, France, where the Virgin Mary had reportedly appeared to young Bernadette Soubirous eighteen times during 1858. The steady stream of astonishing healings led to the establishment in 1883 of the Lourdes Medical Bureau (*Bureau des Constatations Médicales*), where medical experts could properly examine and document healings. Still in existence, the Bureau prides itself on its objectivity, and its office is open to all qualified physicians and medical experts regardless of their religious views. It was during Dr. Gustave Boissarie's tenure as head of the Bureau that our hostile witness made his visit.

Zola's decision to write a novel about the healings at Lourdes caused immense excitement in the press, especially when he visited the shrine where they took place during a national pilgrimage to Lourdes in 1892. Surrounded by the press and politicians, Zola inspected the Medical Bureau, interviewed the sick as well as those who were healed, and made sketches for the characters in his book. Three persons who had experienced healings made it into Zola's novel under different names. Titled *Lourdes*, it was published in 1894.

### MISREPRESENTATION OF MEDICAL CENTER

#### TESTIMONY

There were about fifty of them altogether, many of them leaning on walls. A half dozen, however were seated at tables . . . a father of the Assumption and three young seminarians who acted as secretaries . . . the onlookers consisted almost entirely of inquisitive people and witnesses, including a score of doctors and a few priests. The medical men, who had come from all parts, mostly preserved silence, only a

few of them asked a question; and every now and then they would exchange oblique glances, more occupied apparently in watching one another than in verifying the facts submitted to their examination. Who could they be? Some names were mentioned, but they were quite unknown. Only one had caused any stir, that of a celebrated doctor, professor at a Catholic university.<sup>175</sup>

As Zola describes it, the Lourdes Medical Bureau's staff hardly seems impressive. In fact, it comes off as a rag-tag group of nobodies with questionable credentials. But Dr. Gustave Boissarie, who was present during Zola's visit, states that the writer's description was grossly and perhaps deliberately inaccurate. According to Boissarie, "During the 1892 national pilgrimage, over fifty doctors witnessed our investigations. On the day Zola visited us, there was in our room, a Paris hospital surgeon, corresponding members of the Academy of Medicine, former and actual Paris hospital surgeons, doctors from our large cities, from our principal hot water resorts, and from foreign universities."<sup>176</sup>

Dr. Boissarie also notes that Zola's misrepresentation was based only on the two hours he spent at the Bureau, during which "he did not take a single note or follow a single one of the cures he witnessed; he did not make a single inquiry."<sup>177</sup>

#### ADMISSION AND DOUBT

##### TESTIMONY

I will admit that I came across some instances of real cure. Many cases of nervous disorders have undoubtedly been cured, and there have also been other cures which may, perhaps be attributed to errors of diagnosis on the part of doctors who attended the patients so cured. Often a patient is described by his doctor as suffering from consumption. He goes to Lourdes, and is cured. However, the probability is that the doctor made a mistake. In my own case I was at one time suffering from a violent pain in my chest, which presented all the symptoms of angina pectoris, a mortal malady. It was nothing of the sort. Indigestion, doubtless, and, as such, curable.<sup>178</sup>

##### HOSTILE WITNESS

Zola, despite his obvious skepticism, is compelled to admit that he did witness real cures at Lourdes. It's worth exploring his speculations about

how these cures happened so as to highlight a certain dogmatic blindness on his part to the possibility of miracles.

If people are cured at Lourdes, Zola speculates, it must be because their sicknesses were psychosomatic (i.e., nervous disorders) or the sick person was originally misdiagnosed. Fair enough. Even well-trained physicians can misdiagnose an illness in its early stages, as was the case with Zola's being misdiagnosed for his indigestion. But recognizing a serious illness in its late stages doesn't require much expertise. Ordinary people can tell when someone is dying.

Zola's example of consumption (tuberculosis) as a commonly misdiagnosed illness is interesting because one of the characters in his book, a woman he named La Grivotte, was dying from it. Zola based La Grivotte's condition on the real-life cure that he witnessed of a consumptive woman named Marie Wuiplier Labranchu (1874–1920). Labranchu had been diagnosed at a hospital with acute pulmonary tuberculosis with softening of the lungs and cavities.<sup>179</sup> By the time she arrived at Lourdes, her illness was in its late stages. She had been bedridden for ten months, could not keep food down, and weighed only sixty pounds, having lost forty-eight. Her condition was obviously grave. Zola knew this because he describes Labranchu ("La Grivotte") in his book as follows:

La Grivotte, hitherto stretched out, scarce breathing, like a corpse, had just raised herself up in front of M. Sabathier. She was a tall, slipshod, singular-looking creature of over thirty, with a round, ravaged face, which her frizzy hair and flaming eyes rendered almost pretty. She had reached the third stage of phthisis. . . . ["La Grivotte" later states that] "the doctors say that I have one lung done for, and that the other one is scarcely any better. There are great big holes you know. At first I only felt bad between the shoulders and spat up some froth. But then I got thin, and became a dreadful sight. And now I'm always in a sweat, and cough till I think I'm going to bring my heart up. And I can no longer spit. And I haven't the strength to stand, you see. I can't eat."<sup>180</sup>

One could hardly dismiss La Grivotte/Labranchu's symptoms as the product of a nervous disorder or indigestion. After her bath at Lourdes, Zola describes a near-instantaneous and radical change in her health:

Pierre looked at her, this time quite stupefied. Was this the same girl whom, on the previous night, he had seen lying on the carriage seat, annihilated, coughing and spitting blood, with her face of ashen hue? He could not recognize her as she now stood there, erect and slender, her cheeks rosy, her eyes sparkling, unbuoyed by a determination to live, a joy in living already.[181](#)

What accounts for this radical healing? Zola answers in his book that it wasn't a cure at all. La Grivotte soon relapses and dies while insanely crying out "I am cured, I am cured, completely cured!" Zola (represented by the journalist Pierre) ponders in the novel, "Was this, then, some special case of phthisis complicated by neurosis? Or was it some other malady, some unknown disease, quietly continuing its work in the midst of contradictory diagnosis?"[182](#) All of these speculations make up little more than an atheistic sermon for the reader. None of it can be applied to the actual case from which Zola created La Grivotte.

Marie Labranchu didn't relapse nor did she soon die. She lived a long, healthy life after her cure at Lourdes. Zola knew this because in 1895, a year after his novel was published and three years after Labranchu's cure, he wrote to Labranchu offering to relocate her and her husband in Belgium, all expenses paid.[183](#) One can only speculate as to why Zola made this offer. It may be that Zola feared that Labranchu's living in France in continued good health might hurt book sales.

#### FABRICATION OF FABRICATIONS

##### TESTIMONY

I am the absolute master of my personages. I make her live or die to suit my pleasure. Mrs. Labranchu, being healed, has no ground to complain. I don't believe in miracles, anyhow; should I see all the sick get well instantaneously, I would not believe any more.[184](#)

When Dr. Boissarie confronted Zola about "killing" La Grivotte in the novel when her real-life model, Marie Labranchu, remained alive and never relapsed, Zola replied as above. His remarks underscore the danger of historical novels, especially when the author does not respect the subject matter. Even though La Grivotte had been based on a real person, the author misrepresented real-life events to suit his purpose, even if it meant

tarnishing and impugning the reputation of Lourdes, its Medical Bureau, and the individuals he portrayed in his story.

#### HOSTILE WITNESS

The last line of Zola's response is among the most famous things he ever wrote. "I don't believe in miracles. . . . should I see all the sick get well instantaneously, I would not believe any more."

Zola's biased view is in stark contrast to that of the Medical Bureau staff that he attacks. To this day, the Bureau investigates purported healings impartially, and its conclusions are based on the evidence. Although hundreds, perhaps thousands, of healings have occurred in connection with Lourdes, very few pass the rigorous examination of the Bureau. Most of the people who are healed never bother to officially report their healing to the Bureau, and those who do report it are often rejected because they don't have the proper documentation to establish their original ailment. Even those who report their healing with proper documentation can be ruled out if their healing can be possibly be attributed to some natural cause. If a healing does pass the scrutiny of the Medical Bureau, the case is given to their bishop for his investigation. So far, there have been only sixty-nine cases that have passed the scrutiny of the Bureau and the Church. Such studied skepticism is entirely missing in Zola's case. As he himself stated, no evidence whatsoever could change his mind about miracles; that's because his disbelief in their possibility was based solely on his *a priori* convictions. Zola's atheism eclipsed the evidence, whereas the Lourdes Medical Bureau allowed the evidence to drive their conclusions.

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[175](#) Émile Zola, *Lourdes*, no. 1 of *The Three Cities* trilogy, trans. Ernest Vizetelly (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1897), 252–253.

[176](#) Prosper Gustave Boissarie and C. Van Der Donckt, *Heaven's Recent Wonders: Or the Work of Lourdes* (New York: Frederick Pustet & Co., 1909), 311–312.

[177](#) *Heaven's Recent Wonders*, 308.

[178](#) *Lourdes*, 7.

[179](#) The official diagnosis was pulmonary tuberculosis (Koch's bacillae present in sputum). She was healed on August 20, 1892, at the age of 35. Her cure was recognized as miraculous by the diocese of Paris on June 6, 1908.

[180](#) *Lourdes*, 16–17.

[181](#) *Ibid.*, 266.

[182](#) *Ibid.*, 346.

[183](#) *Heaven's Recent Wonders*, 314–315.

[184](#) *Ibid.*, 316.

## Portugese Anti-Clerical Newspapers—Miracle of Fatima (October 13, 1917)

At the height of World War I, the Blessed Virgin Mary appeared six times to three Portuguese children: Lucia Dos Santos, age nine, and her cousins Francisco and Jacinta Marto, ages eight and six. During these apparitions, Mary spoke about another, greater war to follow, about the fall of Russia and the spreading of her errors throughout the world, and about the coming persecution of the papacy and the Church. To invent such things would have been far beyond the capabilities of three young peasant children living in a secluded mountainous region of Portugal.

The Portuguese government at that time had become thoroughly secularized, and many government officials, influenced by Freemasonry, were virulently anti-Catholic. The news of these Marian apparitions was not welcomed by the state, and they had become objects of ridicule by the anti-clerical press.

The Blessed Virgin promised the children to give the public a visible sign of herself on October 13, 1917. When the day arrived, tens of thousands gathered at the *Cova da Iria* (a field belonging to Lucia's family) in Fatima to see what would happen. The anti-clerical newspapers treated the prospect of a miracle with contempt. It is said that some journalists were so convinced that nothing would happen that they wrote their articles the day before and didn't bother to make the trip. Other journalists came only to ridicule what they believed to be the superstitious, backward piety of uneducated people.

The following hostile witnesses are excerpts from the anti-clerical press who witnessed the event.

### THE MIRACLE OF THE SUN

#### TESTIMONY

And then a unique and, for those who did not witness it, an impossible spectacle took place. From the crest of the road, where the carriages had gathered, full of hundreds of people, which had no courage to

descend to the muddy ground, everyone could see the great crowd turning toward the sun, which was high in the clear sky. The heavenly body was like an opaque silver plate, and it was possible to look at it without the least effort. It did not burn nor did it blind. It was as if an eclipse was taking place. But suddenly a loud clamor arose and the onlookers who were nearest were heard shouting, "Miracle, miracle, wonderful, wonderful!"

Before the fascinated look of those people whose attitude would remind one of a biblical times; and who white with fear, bare-headed, looked up at the sky, the sun trembled. It performed never-before-seen brusque movements beyond all laws of nature. The sun "danced," as some country people so aptly expressed it. . . . And afterward, everyone asked everyone else if they had seen and told what they themselves had seen. The majority confessed to have seen the shaking, the dancing of the sun. Others, however, declared that they had seen the smiling face of the Virgin herself. They swore that the sun had spun around on its own axis like something in a fireworks display, that it had descended almost to the point of setting the Earth on fire with its rays. There were those who said that they had seen it continuously changing colors. It was almost 3 P.M. The sky was cloudless and the sun followed its course with its normal splendor, which no one dared to look at directly. . . . It remains for those qualified to give their opinion, in all fairness, on the uncanny dance of the sun which today in Fatima caused explosions of hosannas from the throats of the faithful and, according to the testimony of trustworthy people, impressed the free-thinkers, as well as others with no religious affiliation whatsoever, who had flocked to the now already celebrated spot.[185](#)

#### TESTIMONY

At one o'clock in the afternoon, midday by the sun, the rain stopped. The sky, pearly grey in color, illuminated the vast arid landscape with a strange light. The sun had a transparent gauzy veil so that the eyes could easily be fixed upon it. The grey mother-of-pearl tone turned into a sheet of silver which broke up as the clouds were torn apart and the silver sun, enveloped in the same gauzy grey light, was seen to whirl and turn in the circle of broken clouds. A cry went up from every

mouth and people fell on their knees. . . . The light turned a beautiful blue, as if it had come through the stained-glass windows of a cathedral, and spread itself over the people who knelt with outstretched hands. The blue faded slowly, and then the light seemed to pass through yellow glass. Yellow stains fell against white handkerchiefs, against the dark skirts of the women. They were repeated on the trees, on the stones and on the serra. People wept and prayed with uncovered heads, in the presence of a miracle they had awaited. The seconds seemed like hours, so vivid were they.[186](#)

#### OTHER TESTIMONY

##### TESTIMONY

I continued to observe the place of the apparition without any great expectations, and with my curiosity becoming less and less, due to the length and slowness of the time, and with nothing happening to attract my attention. I listened to the clamor of thousands of voices and watched that multitude . . . turn their backs to the place where up to then the desires and expectations converged, and look up at the sky in the opposite direction.

It was almost two o'clock. A few moments previously, the sun had triumphantly broken through the layer of clouds that had been covering it, and was shining bright and clear.

I turned to this magnet that was attracting the eyes of everyone, and could see it clear-cut, sharp-edged, brilliantly shining disk, and it did not hurt to look at it.

In my opinion, the comparison that I heard made in Fatima to a full silver disk is not a good one. It was of a much clearer, livelier and richer color, and with hues that gave it the appearance of a pearl. . . . It was also not to be confused with the sun as seen through fog (which incidentally there wasn't at that time), and which is opaque, diffuse and veiled. In Fatima it had light and heat, and was as clear-cut as could be.

The sky was covered with wisps of clouds, with the blue breaking through the sunlight (sunlight which was not annoying). They actually gave the impression, understandably enough, of having passed behind

the sun. At times, these wisps of clouds, white in beginning, seemed to take on a pink or translucent blue as they glided past the sun.

The amazing thing is that one could look at the sun, the very source of light and heat, for a long time without pain to one's eyes or dazzling the retina to blindness.

The phenomenon must have lasted for about ten minutes, during which there were two brief interruptions, when the fierce sun threw out more brilliant and flashing rays, and which forced one to look away.

This pearly disk suddenly began to move. It was not the movement of a planet in its normal source. It spun on its own axis at a breakneck speed.

Suddenly a cry was heard like an anguished shout, from all those people. The sun, maintaining the velocity of its rotation, dislodged itself from the firmament, and full-bloodedly advanced on the earth, threatening to crush us with the weight of its enormous and fiery mass. They were seconds of a terrifying impression. . . .

Staring at the sun, I noticed that everything around me became dark. I looked at things close by and then threw my gaze to the horizon and saw everything a purplish color. Objects, the sky and the air were all the same color. A purple colored oak tree in front of me threw a gloomy shadow on the ground. Worried that perhaps I had damaged my retina, an unlikely hypothesis, since, if that had been the case, I would not have been seeing things purple; I turned around, rubbed my eyelids and covered them with my hands to keep out the light. Still turned around, I opened my eyes and saw that, just as before, the landscape and the air continued to be the same purple color.

The impression was not that of an eclipse. I had seen the eclipse of the sun, which in Viseu, where I had been at the time, had been total. .

..

Continuing to look at the sun, I noticed that the air had cleared . . . . In fact, everything near and far now changed, taking on the color of old yellow damasks. . . .

Days later I did a test of looking directly at the sun for a few moments. Looking away, I saw after a few moments the forms of uneven yellow spots. You did not see everything the same color, as if

in the air a yellow topaz had been volatilized, but rather dots or spots that would follow the movement of the eyes.

All these phenomena which I have cited and described were observed by me, coolly and calmly, without any emotion or fear.<sup>187</sup>

The two newspaper accounts above can be characterized as hostile witnesses. Both papers were anti-clerical and undoubtedly attended the event in order to mock its failure. The other eyewitness account is from a Catholic scientist named Dr. Jose Garrett. His testimony is included, not because he opposed the Faith, but because as a scientist he strove to provide an objective account of what he observed and tested it after the fact to be certain that what he reported was accurate. The three testimonies combined provide a substantial ground upon which to consider what transpired on October 13, 1917 in Fatima.

#### HOSTILE WITNESS

As with all authentic eyewitness testimony, our hostile witnesses' reports are unified in substance but differ in detail. For example, all affirm that something unprecedented was observed on the day the spectacle was predicted. The phenomenon was seen by both the hostile witnesses and believers. They agree that the sun during the time of the miracle could be viewed directly without discomfort. Its appearance changed to something like mother-of-pearl. Two of the three witnesses mention that the sun changed colors. All three testify that the sun moved in an unnatural and unprecedented fashion before returning to its normal position in the sky.

Critics have generally accepted these and other eyewitness accounts. The number and diversity of witnesses are too great to dismiss outright. The critics' main focus, however, has been on giving a purely natural explanation for what was observed. Three of the most popular solutions for the phenomenon are (1) mass hallucinations, (2) an optical illusion caused by staring at the sun, and (3) a rare meteorological phenomenon of upper atmosphere dust particles causing the sun's light to change colors. The witnesses above show that all three of these possible solutions are problematic.

Mass hallucination seems to be the most common explanation. Religious fervor and the desire to see something supernatural, the argument goes, caused a kind of mass hysteria where the crowd convinced itself that it was

seeing something happening in the sky. Our hostile witnesses show that this was not the case. It's impossible to say that these unbelievers were worked up into a frenzy wishing to see something. Quite the opposite. They expected *not* to see anything but a display of overheated piety and superstition. Furthermore, the miracle did not occur when the people's expectations were at their peak, as one would expect to happen if it were a mass hallucination; it occurred when the people's hope had subsided and many had begun to head home. According to Dr. Garrett and others, the people had waited so long they became skeptical that anything would happen. Then the miracle appeared.

An optical illusion caused by staring at the sun can also be ruled out. According to the testimony, our hostile witnesses turned their attention to the sun only *after* the phenomenon had begun to take place, not before. Remember, the exact nature of the sign was never specified. Therefore, the main focus of attention was directed toward the area where the children said the Virgin Mary appeared to them, not the sky. Therefore, even if prolonged staring at the sun could produce something like these effects, such was not the case in Fatima. Furthermore, if the phenomenon had been an optical illusion caused by staring at the sun, it should be repeatable. But all our hostile witnesses claim that the sun's movement was unprecedented, and Dr. Garrett even attempted to reproduce the phenomenon a few days later by staring at the sun. He noted that the results of this test were very different than what he observed on October 13th.

The meteorological explanation of upper atmosphere dust particles changing the color of the sun is only a partial solution, since it would only explain the change in color mentioned by two of our three witnesses. It doesn't explain the sun's movement. Pictures of the dust particle phenomenon show the sun peering through a hazy sky. Our witnesses state, however, that the sun was observed directly without any cloud cover.

These anti-clerical witnesses, despite their strong disinclination to see anything supernatural, testified that something unprecedented in human history did indeed happen at Fatima during the day and hour the Virgin Mary had told the three shepherd children that it would.

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<sup>185</sup> As quoted in Fr. Antonio Maria Martins and Fr. Robert Fox's *Documents of Fatima and the Memoirs of Sister Lucia: Pictorial Documentary and Historical Update* (Alexandria, ND: Fatima Family Apostolate, 1992), 170–171.

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## National Socialist Party (Nazis) (1935–1945)

“Hitler’s pope” has become the latest anti-Catholic myth to be added to popular history. Its defamatory claim: Pope Pius XII, who was said to have saved over a half-million Jewish lives during World War II and was heralded as an ardent partner with the Allies, was in fact a silent collaborator with the anti-Semitic Nazi regime.

The giant flip-flop from righteous Gentile to Nazi sympathizer began in earnest with Rolf Hochhuth’s 1963 play, *The Deputy*. In it, Pius XII is portrayed sitting idly by while the Jews suffer Nazi brutalities beneath his terrace. Decades after the play was published, a top Soviet intelligence officer, Lt. Gen. Ion Mihai Pacepa, disclosed that it was part of a wider Soviet disinformation campaign to undermine the Church’s moral authority both inside and outside the Soviet Bloc. Although *The Deputy* won critical acclaim, its thesis was debunked in several popular and scholarly works. By the 1970s, the “Black Legend” of Pius’s silence and complicity had fallen into oblivion—until it was resurrected by John Cornwell’s 1999 bestseller, *Hitler’s Pope: The Secret History of Pope Pius XII*.

Cornwell’s book cover cleverly featured a photo of Pius XII leaving what appears to be a Nazi residence with a man in a Nazi uniform saluting him. The impression given: the Nazis saw Pius XII as an ally. Few people noticed that the pope was dressed not in his papal whites, but as a cardinal. That’s because the photo was taken not during World War II, but back in 1927, long before Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli became pope and six years before Hitler came to power. A comparison of the photo with its original shows that the chauffeur’s armband, which had two stripes, was doctored to make it look like the single solid band similar to what Nazi soldiers wore.

The book’s marketing campaign was very successful, and the myth of Hitler’s pope became a staple of popular history. But the book’s success also provoked an avalanche of thoroughly documented material—most notably, Ronald Rychlak’s definitive *Hitler, the War, and the Pope*—that utterly demolished the myth.<sup>188</sup> Defenses of Pope Pius XII and the Church’s role during World War II came from scholars of all different

religions and points of view—Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and secular. Unfortunately, the lie is what gets the lion's share of publicity, not the subsequent refutations. By the time these works came to press, the subject was deemed no longer newsworthy.

Since our hostile witnesses were all officers within the National Socialist (Nazi) Party, we are not going to separate the witnesses into their own respective chapters. Instead, they will be grouped together and treated as one.

#### CATHOLIC CLERGY ARE UNDERMINING THE NAZI PROGRAM

##### TESTIMONY

The most dangerous activity of countless Catholic clergy is the way in which they “mope about,” spreading despondency. Favorite topics are the “dangers of a new time,” “the present emergency,” “the gloomy future.” Prophecies are made about the speedy downfall of National Socialism or at the very least mention is made of the transience of all political phenomena, compared with the Catholic Church which will outlive them all. National Socialists' achievements and successes are passed over in silence. There is thus a deliberated undermining of the very basis of the National Socialist program of reconstruction, the people's trust in the leadership of the state.[189](#)

##### HOSTILE WITNESS

It is clear that Heinrich Himmler, leading member of the Nazi party, understood very early on that the Catholic Church was not on the Nazis' side. In fact, he characterizes the Catholic clergy as being “most dangerous,” as being silent about the National Socialists' achievements, and as undermining the people's trust in the Nazi leadership.

Himmler also alludes to the claim made by Catholics about “the transience of all political phenomena, compared to the Catholic Church which outlived them all.” The longevity of the Church, indeed its seeming permanence, had been a sore sport with hostile witnesses for centuries, and the expectation that it would continue long after the so-called Third Reich was well grounded. After all, the Church not only was born centuries before the First Reich (the Holy Roman Empire), but it survived the Second Reich (the bitter anti-Catholic *Kulturkampf* of the German Empire, 1871–1918). Hitler believed the Third Reich would last a thousand years. It lasted less

than twelve. On May 8, 1945, Nazi Germany capitulated to the Allies, and the “prophecies” mentioned by Himmler were fulfilled.

#### FREEDOM OF RELIGION RESTRICTED TO FREEDOM OF WORSHIP

##### TESTIMONY

Neither in earlier times nor today has the [National Socialist] Party the intention of waging any kind of war against Christianity. But under no circumstances will the National Socialist State tolerate the continuance or fresh beginning of the politicizing of the denominations by roundabout ways. Here let there be no mistake about the determination of the movement and the State. We have already fought political clericalism once and driven it out of Parliament, and that, too, after a long struggle, in which we had no power of the State behind us, and the other side had all the power. Today it is we who have this power; and we shall never wage the war as a war against Christianity or even against one of the two denominations; but we shall wage it in order to keep our public life free from those priests who have fallen short of their calling, and who think they have to be politicians, not pastors of the flock.<sup>[190](#)</sup>

Hitler instituted several anti-Jewish laws that banned German Jews from participation in government, including voting, along with other measures to prevent the intermixing of “Aryans” with Jews. Catholic and Protestant leaders protested these moves, provoking Hitler’s response quoted above. Hitler had no intention of going after Christianity (at least not yet), but his words make it clear that he would not tolerate religious people “interfering” in government matters.

##### HOSTILE WITNESS

By the mid-1930s, the National Socialist Party, a neo-pagan totalistic cult, had come to power in Germany. Knowing that the core beliefs of his movement ran counter to those of Christianity, Hitler attempted to marginalize and stigmatize any Catholic priest or Protestant clergyman who dared to criticize the Party or its policies. He labeled such speech as “political clericalism.” In other words, Hitler wished to introduce a distinction between freedom of religion and freedom of worship (much as is occurring today in America). Christians were free to worship any way they liked, but they were not free to apply those beliefs to issues concerning the

dignity of human life and how people ought to be governed, especially if it entailed criticizing Party policies. By making this distinction, the Reich's leadership attempted to bar Christians from following the ethical and social implications and duties that their faith demanded.[191](#)

#### SHINTOISM AND ISLAM BETTER SUITED THAN CHRISTIANITY

##### TESTIMONY

You see, it has been our misfortune to have the wrong religion. Why didn't we have the religion of the Japanese, who regard sacrifice for the Fatherland as the highest good? The Mohammedan religion too would have been much more compatible to us than Christianity. Why did it have to be Christianity with its meekness and flabbiness?[192](#)

Albert Speer (1905–1981) was part of Hitler's inner circle, as his chief architect and Minister of Armaments and War Production. In his memoirs, Speer records how Hitler "adapted his remarks to his surroundings" when Christianity was concerned, speaking harshly against the churches among political associates but in milder tones elsewhere. Earlier in Speer's memoir, Hitler is quoted as having speculated that if the Battle of Tours (October 10, 732) had gone the other way, Germany would have been Islamic. And since Arabs are racially inferior to Aryans, he concluded, Germany "could have stood at the head of this Mohammedan Empire." Hitler then lamented the "misfortune" of his being born into the wrong religion.

##### HOSTILE WITNESS

Hitler identified two religions that seemed more compatible with Nazi Germany than Christianity: Shintoism and Islam. In Japan at the time, the head of the state was deified. Therefore, as Hitler correctly notes, sacrifice for the state was the highest good, since one would be serving a deified emperor. The Islamic state follows *sharia* law (Islamic Law) where mosque and state are essentially one, so that sacrificing for the state can be seen as following the law of Allah. Christianity, however, deifies neither the state nor the head of state. The law of the state is not the highest law, nor is service to one's country the *highest* good.[193](#) The Church has long honored the saints who were willing to be tortured and executed rather than worship

the deified Roman emperor or other tyrants. Hitler confused Christian meekness with weakness.

#### THE CATHOLIC CHURCH REJECTS THE NATIONALIST STATE

##### TESTIMONY

Catholic believers carry away but one impression from attendance at divine services and that is that the Catholic Church rejects the institutions of the Nationalist State. How could it be otherwise when they are continuously engaging in polemics on political questions or events in their sermons. . . . Hardly a Sunday passes but that they abuse the so-called religious atmosphere of the divine service in order to read pastoral letters on purely political subjects.[194](#)

##### HOSTILE WITNESS

Far from being silent, the Catholic clergy were constantly bombarding the Nazis with protests. In a not-so-veiled threat of using force, Goering and other Nazis characterized such protests as religious meddling in political affairs. One such political “pastoral letter” read from pulpits was Pope Pius XI’s *On the Church and the German Reich (Mit Brennender Sorge)*.[195](#) It is the only papal encyclical to be written in German, and copies of it were smuggled into Germany so that it could be read from every Catholic pulpit. The co-author of this encyclical was Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli—later to become Pope Pius XII, the so-called Hitler’s pope). During World War II, the Allies air-dropped thousands of copies of *Mit Brennender Sorge* as propaganda leaflets over Germany.

#### THE POPE IS THE MOUTHPIECE OF THE JEWISH WAR CRIMINALS

##### TESTIMONY

In a manner never known before, the pope has repudiated the National Socialist New European Order. His [Christmas 1942] radio allocution was a masterpiece of clerical falsification of the National Socialist *Weltanschauung*. It is true, the pope does not refer to the National Socialists in Germany by name, but his speech is one long attack on everything we stand for. . . . God, he says, regards all people and races as worthy of the same consideration. Here he is clearly speaking on behalf of the Jews. . . . That this speech is directed exclusively against the New Order in Europe as seen in National Socialism is clear in the

papal statement that mankind owes a debt to “all who during the war have lost their Fatherland and who, although personally blameless have, simply on account of their nationality and origin, been killed or reduced to utter destitution.” Here he is virtually accusing the German people of injustice toward the Jews and makes himself the mouthpiece of the Jewish war criminals.[196](#)

#### HOSTILE WITNESS

The key line to note in this communiqué is “it is true, the pope does not refer to the National Socialists in Germany by name, but his speech is one long attack on everything we stand for.” The Nazi command clearly considered Pope Pius XII to be anything but silent. There was no need for the pope to mention the Nazis by name, since everyone knew whom he was talking about. This communiqué shows that the Nazi leadership got the pope’s message loud and clear.

Critics, decades after the fact, have faulted Pius XII for not attacking National Socialism more directly, but the consequences of such an attack would have been disastrous. The Vatican would have lost its neutral status and would have been invaded; hundreds of Jews who were hiding inside the Vatican would have been deported or killed. Moreover, all of the Vatican’s clandestine humanitarian efforts (as well as anti-Nazi efforts) would have been exposed, unleashing even greater suffering and death. If this had happened, the same critics who charge Pope Pius XII with being silent would attack the pope as a religious zealot who couldn’t keep from preaching even though it meant the death of thousands of innocent people.

The German Foreign Office understood the pope’s Christmas broadcast to be an attack on everything they stood for. It should also be noted that the official Vatican newspaper, *L’ Osservatore Romano*, continued to comment on aspects of the speech well into 1943.[197](#)

#### CONCLUSION

This chapter only scratches the surface of the available evidence refuting the myth of Hitler’s pope. Hitler didn’t care for Christianity or the Church; they were not compatible with National Socialism. And even though Hitler would speak positively about Christianity when the occasion demanded it, as Speer notes, he considered military Shintoism and Islam much more compatible with National Socialism largely because their theocratic

ideology made serving the state the individual's highest good. The other hostile witnesses in this chapter also show that the Nazis saw the Catholic Church and its pope as threats to their regime.

Yet the myth of Hitler's pope continues even today.

#### FURTHER READING

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<sup>188</sup> Ronald J. Rychlak, *Hitler, the War, and the Pope*, revised and expanded ed. (Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor Press, 2010).

<sup>189</sup> Quoted in Rychlak, *Hitler, the War, and the Pope*, 85.

<sup>190</sup> Nathaniel Micklem, *National Socialism and the Roman Catholic Church: Being an Account of the Conflict Between the National Socialist Government of Germany and the Roman Catholic Church, 1933–1938* (London: Oxford University Press, 1939), 2.

<sup>191</sup> Hitler seems to realize the religious appeal of his ideology in a comment recorded in Kurt Ludeke's book *I Knew Hitler: The Story of a Nazi Who Escaped the Blood Purge* (New York: Scribner, 1937), 128: "National Socialism is a form of conversion, a new faith, but we don't need to raise that issue—it will come of itself. . . . Sooner or later, once we hold the power, Christianity will be overcome, and the *Deutsche Kirche* established. Yes, the German Church, without a pope and without the Bible—and Luther, if he could be with us, would give us his blessing. Of course, I myself am a heathen to the core."

<sup>192</sup> Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich*, trans. Richard Winston, Clara Winston, and Eugene Davidson (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 143.



193 The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that citizenship is a high, but not the highest, good, and Christians are obliged to conduct themselves for the good of society (CCC 2238–2243). Online at [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/\\_P7W.HTM](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P7W.HTM).

194 Robert A. Graham, *Pius XII's Defense of Jews and Others, 1944–45* (Catholic League for Religious & Civil Rights, 1964), 2.

195 To put this in perspective, *Mit Brennender Sorge* condemned National Socialism in March 1937. A year later the Allies (at that time Britain and France) were attempting to appease Hitler by allowing him to annex portions of Czechoslovakia at the Munich Conference.

196 Quoted in Anthony Rhodes's *The Vatican in the Age of Dictator: 1922–1945* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1973), 272–273.

197 *Ibid.*, 272–3.



Postscript

## An Unexpected Image Emerges

On May 28, 1898, Secondo Pia, an Italian lawyer and amateur photographer, was developing his photos (the first ever taken) of the Shroud of Turin, the purported burial cloth of Jesus, which bears a barely discernible image of a beaten and crucified man. When Pia held his first negative up to the light, he was astonished at what he saw. What had appeared faint, two-dimensional, and lacking in detail when viewed under normal conditions had become startlingly realistic. Pia realized that the image on the Shroud itself was like a photo negative—where light areas appear dark and dark ones light—and that in reversing that process his photo negative made the Shroud image look like a photo positive. Suddenly, the image had become startlingly lifelike and three-dimensional, and details that were barely noticeable in normal light had become rich and robust.

For many of us, what we learn from the historical testimony of “friendly witnesses” to Christianity can become like the image of the Shroud of Turin in normal light. Christ and his Church can seem two-dimensional, lacking in depth and detail.

But the testimony of hostile witnesses can be like the photo negative that reveals details and dimensions never seen before, and a much more compelling and realistic image of Christ and his Church emerges. Often in spite of themselves, these witnesses help to make the case that something wonderful and awe-inspiring happened in first-century Judea that continues even to this day, and no doubt will continue until the end of time.

This is the praise of Christ’s enemies.